SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

OCTOBER

15¢

# STAR WESTERN

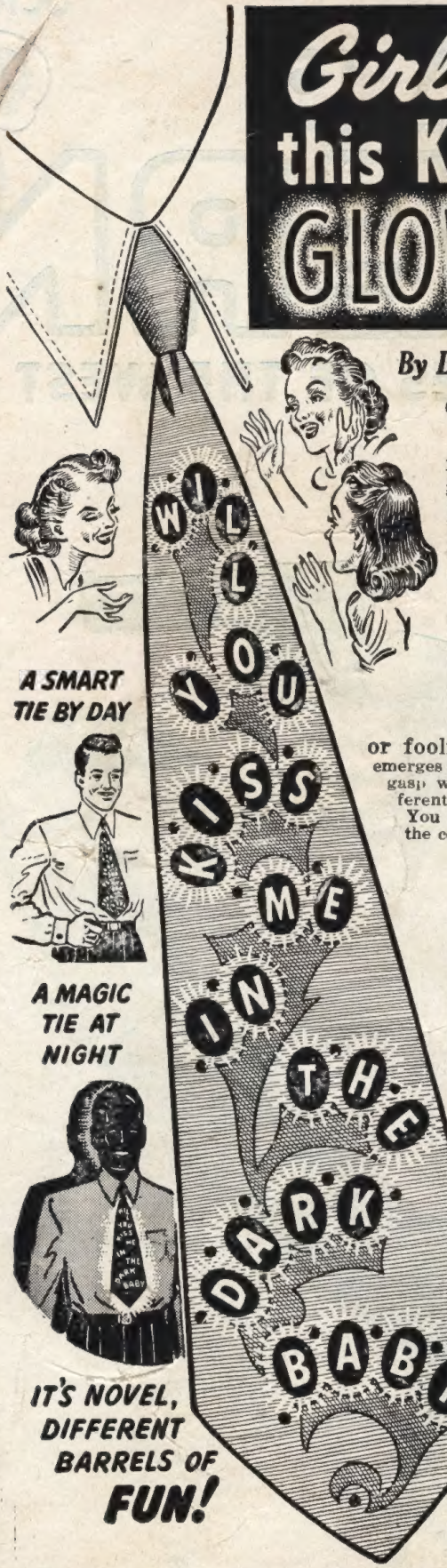
BIGGER AND B[illegible]RIES OF THE WEST!

THE MOCCASIN TRACK INVASION
by WALT COBURN

ROLL 'ER THROUGH TO FORT BRIDGER!
by CLIFF FARRELL

OLMSTED
PATTERSON · COX

# Girls Can't Resist this KISS ME NECKTIE as it GLOWS in the DARK!



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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

# STAR WESTERN

## BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-FOUR OCTOBER, 1944 NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**ROLL 'ER THROUGH TO FORT BRIDGER!**.....*CLIFF FARRELL* 10
Only a fool, they said, would try to blast that Overland stage trail past Mitch Buckman's gun-army. . . . With the Southern route in Rebel hands, Silk Callahan knew it would take a fool—the fighting kind!—to save the war-torn Union.

**HOSS GREER'S MURDER MINE**.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 30
Old Hoss figured there was something wrong with a swap that gave him a million-dollar gold mine for a song—and when the drygulched bodies of his two friends turned it into a funeral dirge, he knew he was right!

**THE MOCCASIN TRACK INVASION**.....*WALT COBURN* 42
Lon Lomax and Deacon Melgren had signed an unholy pact to take over the whole Musselshell country—but Jeff Kincaid figured it took only one fighting man to stop a hundred coyotes!

**THE GUNSIGHT GHOST FILLS HIS HAND**.....*FRANK BONHAM* 54
It couldn't be—but it *was* the ghost of Brimstone Bill, come back from his twelve years' grave, to prove that freedom does not die with the valiant men who defend it!

**END OF THE RED WAR-TRAIL**.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 70
Dull Knife's pitiful little band wanted only peace and freedom . . . but to Dick Clyman's bull-necked friends, the only good redskin was a dead one—and that went for any white man who befriended them!

**REBELS OF SIGNAL VALLEY**.....*ROD PATTERSON* 80
To side the man who had cursed him as both coward and traitor, big Hugh Cantrell raced into a hell of blazing guns—from which neither he nor his one-time pardner could hope to return!

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

**UP THE TRAIL**.....*A DEPARTMENT* 6
A pint of milk would save a life—but those cowhands had never milked a cow!

**THE BRANDING CORRAL**.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 8
The place where every argufier on Western lore can have his say.

**HARDROCK RATIONING**.....*E. RODERIC FUCHS* 29
Flour, $1.50 a pound—if and when you could get it!

NOVEMBER ISSUE OUT OCTOBER 11TH!

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# ★ UP THE TRAIL ★

RECENT events have reminded us of an old cow-country yarn we once heard—the story of the ranch hands who had to milk a cow.

One of the bunkhouse crew lay desperately ill. What he needed to pull him through, the doctor said, was a glass of fresh milk. The sick man's friends looked at each other helplessly. "You say he'll die shore if he don't git it, Doc?" one asked.

"He will. May die even if he does, but it'll give him a chance."

"But won't canned milk do?"

"Not the same thing. He's got to have fresh milk."

They looked at each other again with a hangdog air, then trooped out without a word. No one of them had ever milked a cow before, or even seen one milked. Moreover, if anyone under any other circumstances had ever so much as suggested that they milk a cow, he would have had a fight on his hands. But this was different. Resignedly, they went looking for a cow with a calf.

They found one out on the range, and drove it in to the corrals. There, after some consultation, they roped and hogtied it. Then one man squatted on his bootheels beside it with a tin cup in his hand. With the other hand he selected a teat and squeezed.

To those who have had experience with dairy stock, the next hour will not have to be described. Milking is an art in itself, by no means as easy as it looks, and in addition, an annoyed, indignant, non-contented cow will not "drop her milk". At the end of the hour the rannihan, tired, sweaty and red-faced, had about a spoonful at the bottom of the cup.

Swearing eternal damnation upon the heads of all stubborn, uncooperative cattle, the cowboy gave up his place to another, who tried with little more success. But with true frontiersman's determination, they refused to give up. They spelled each other, and when the cow finally would not give another drop, they roped another and went on. By sundown they had a cupful of milk—and the sick cowpuncher lived.

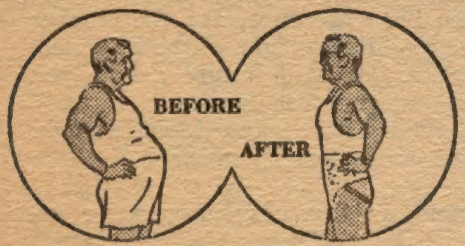
Our problem is a little simpler, but it's comparable. Our friends and relatives in France, Italy and the South Pacific don't need milk, but they do need blood. A pint of plasma made from our blood will save the life of a soldier—who needs it because he's given *his* blood for us. And giving a pint of blood, with the gentle, efficient methods of modern Red Cross Blood Banks, is a good deal easier than getting a pint of milk from a roped and hogtied cow!

A Red Cross unit can process only so many pints of blood each day. If too few of us make appointments for any given day, the equipment must lie idle an hour or so—and that much blood is irretrievably lost to our men on the fighting fronts. Let's help make sure that won't happen—call up your local Blood Bank and make an appointment today!

—The Editor

"PERFECT FORM"

# Now you can *INSTANTLY* appear SLIMMER feel BETTER, look YOUNGER

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Notice the back view of The New Governor, as pictured. The connecting tie on your right ends in a Y-shape. The connecting tie on your left passes through this Y in the shape of a T. When in place, these Y and T elastic ties hold this modern Supporter Belt firmly in place.

The Y-T sections of The Governor are made from powerful woven, natural elastic —not synthetic! Easy to step into, The New GOVERNOR slips on or off in three seconds! Thanks to its exclusive Elastic Y-T construction—found in no other belt!—It *stays put*, and controls abdominal sag with firm but gentle support!

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# ★ The Branding Corral ★

## Conducted by Strawboss

WHEREVER men's interests have clashed, individually or collectively—which is to say, all over the world for as far back as we know about—they've fought with whatever weapons came to hand. If spears, knives, guns, brass knucks or other tools made especially for fighting were handy, so much the better. But if not, like the farmers of Lexington and the Parisian mobs in the French revolution, they picked up anything and everything that could inflict a wound—spades, mattocks, hay forks or even brooms. Bob Carlisle of San Bernardino, California, has this to say about that unusual weapon, the whip:

Dear Strawboss:

I read Tom Roan's story, "Bullwhip Bill Gunsmoke Judge and Jury" in the last issue and let me say that your author was right, a bullwhip can do plenty of damage in the hand of a man that knows how to use one. But just the same, if I had to fight a man with a gun, and I couldn't have a gun myself, the weapon I would pick would be a stage driver's whip, which is *twenty-four feet* long from butt to cracker. I happen to own such a whip which was given to me by my grandfather, O. B. Dover, who was one of the real old-time stage drivers in California.

I thought you might be interested in hearing about this whip, which is still in good condition and nearly as good as it was sixty years ago. The stock is made of oak, and is eight feet long, tapering from two inches at the butt.

The whiplash is sixteen feet long, not counting the cracker. It is made of leather braided around a core of linen thread and copper wire. It is about ½ inch thick for the first ten feet, then tapers to ¼ inch.

The "business end" of the whole thing is the cracker. This is made of silk floss, very fine, and shoemaker's thread, braided and waxed with shoemaker's wax. This is what made the popping noise, as loud or as soft as wanted, to urge the team on.

The whip is twenty-four feet long from "stem to stern," but actually its range is *thirty feet*. This extra length is accounted for by the reach of a man's arm, and also by the whip stretching. A driver could pick the petals off a flower at thirty feet, one by one.

Well as you can see, at thirty feet this whip is as accurate as any gun or more so. And not only that but it could really tear a hole in a man too. My grandfather used to tell about the time he was jumped by a road agent on the San Francisco run. This fellow leaped out of the brush when my grandfather was just coming up to the top of a steep rise. He hollered out, "Pull up, you ——, or I'll shoot your head off." Grandfather didn't even hesitate a moment. He just flicked his whip once, and the cracker caught the road agent right where he aimed, in the throat. He said it tore a hole you could have put your fist in.

Well, I guess I have spouted long enough. Keep those good stories coming!

Many thanks for that very informative letter, Friend Carlisle. That whip sure sounds like a formidable weapon, and we wouldn't like to be on the business end of it!

*Bloodthirsty Cattle*

Next comes Frank Horlick of Bangor, Maine, with a question about the effect of fresh-spilled blood on cattle:

Dear Strawboss:

I have heard that cattle, when they catch the scent of fresh cow blood, seem to go crazy, milling around the spot, bawling in a peculiar way, and sometimes getting so excited as to injure each other unless stopped. Is this true, and if so, is there any explanation that you know of?

It's true, but we've never heard any explanation of it. A steer, coming across a fresh hide with blood on it, will paw at it, smell it and "beller" a series of short, moaning sounds, followed by a prolonged bawl and then a high sound, almost a scream. This call brings any other cattle within hearing on the run, all echoing the "blood-call," until there is a sizeable herd milling around the spot.

One brush-country rancher we heard about, the morning he was to ship, poured on the ground about a gallon of bull's blood that he'd saved from a slaughtering the day before, and then drove a few half-tame cattle to the spot. Within an hour, he had a herd of five hundred cattle, some of them mossyhorns that hadn't been out of the thickest *brasada* in years.

Well, that's all until next month, gang. Until then,

*Hasta luego!*

—STRAWBOSS

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*City and State*.....

# ROLL 'ER THROUGH

## By Cliff Farrell

**They called Silk Callahan a reckless, hell-bent fool for trying to blast that Overland mail route past the man-killing Medicine Bow range, hostile Indians, and Mitch Buckman's gun-army . . . With the fate of the Union trembling in the balance, Silk knew that only the sort of fool who never knew when to quit fighting could ever see those coaches through to Fort Bridger!**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Gun-Boss of the Overland

EARLY darkness had drawn a friendly veil over old Julesburg, softening the ugly shapes of its sod and frame walls. To the eyes of Silk Callahan and Jawbone Jenkins, starved for the sight of civilization,

# TO FORT BRIDGER!

**Vivid Novel of the Overland Trail**

They hurled their mounts toward each other. . . .

the window lights of the town were a glittering fan laid across the lonely vastness of the plains before them.

"Like a diamond necklace on a purty woman," old Jawbone said fervently. "Reminds me o' that Gilroy gal back in Independence. Remember the rocks she used to wear? 'Member, Silk, when we was rammin' stages through to Santa Fe?"

"I remember," nodded Silk Callahan. "This is another day. Now we're trying to ram stages through to California. Forget about the Gilroy girl and her diamonds."

Leading a pack mule, they rode down the length of the muddy frontier town. Julesburg, there at the crossroads of the Pikes Peak and California trails, was noisy and booming. They stared into barrooms and music halls, drinking in the sight of humanity, hearing the music.

"Yum! Yum!" Jawbone breathed, sniffing the air with ecstacy. "I smell hot toddies. I smell rock 'n rye. I smell buttered rum an'—"

"You won't be able to smell anything if I catch you lapping up any redeye tonight, you old warthog," Silk Callahan said. "You're staying sober until I say the word. No hooraw, no Spanish monte, no stomp dances, you hear me? I want you with me and able to shoot straight if you have to."

"When I signed up as division boss for Great Western Mail you didn't tell me I was j'inin' a convent," Jawbone complained.

"Julesburg won't look like a convent to you after I have a pow-wow with Mitch Buckman," Silk said grimly.

They rode on to where Great Western Mail, the new stagecoach company, had established

its yards. Big stock corrals and barns loomed against the stars, flanked by mule pens and lots where bulky freight wagons were stored. Great mounds of baled hay and straw towered in the background. Housed beneath sheds were more than thirty new Concord stagecoaches, the best that Abbott and Downing could supply, their shining paint and varnish protected by tarps.

A barn man came running to care for their jaded horses. Silk and Jawbone swung down, slapping their saddle-numbed thighs. "Any idea where I'd find Mitchell Buckman about this time of night?" Silk asked the barn man.

"Up at the Silver Slipper, most likely. They got a new yaller-haired singer that Buckman's stuck on."

"Come on," Silk said to Jawbone.

A COLD light burned in Silk's eyes—smoke-blue against a face that was tanned the color of a saddle. A weathered, flat-crowned hat was raked across his buckskin-colored hair. His saddle boots had worn out up in the Medicine Bow Mountains, and he strode along now in a pair of Cheyenne moccasins. Jawbone, who was bow-legged, with bushy, graying hair and a wrinkled leathery skin, had to hustle to keep pace with Silk's long stride.

With Jawbone at his heels, Silk walked into the Silver Slipper. The place was the most ornate in Julesburg. It was a high-roofed frame structure, built as a music hall, with a separate wing for gambling.

Tables, crowded with men and percentage girls, filled the main room. A balcony circled three sides of the structure, containing booths that overlooked the stage and main floor.

A golden-haired, bare-shouldered girl in a wine-red evening gown was on the stage alone, singing "La Golondrina." Silk stopped dead in his tracks.

Jawbone gaped. "That's Lucinda Morrow, or I'm a Piute," the old man marveled. "Purtier'n ever, too. Wasn't it in Santa Fe thet she kissed you goodbye, Silk, an' promised to quit rackin' around the frontier, wastin' her time singin' to buffalo hunters an' bullwhackers an' gamblers?"

"That's Lou Morrow," Silk nodded regretfully. "She didn't keep her promise."

"She's spotted you, Silk. Look at her fluster up. She knows you'll give her hell."

"I ought to lodgepole her," Silk said. "I'll talk to her later." He turned to a waiter. "Mitch Buckman in the house?"

"Upstairs, mister. He don't want to be bothered."

"Isn't that a shame," Silk remarked. He pushed the waiter aside. "You stay down here, Jawbone," he added, and mounted to the balcony.

He strode along a plush-carpeted corridor, peering into curtained booths until he found the man he sought.

Mitchell Buckman was in a chair at the front of the booth. As the golden-haired girl's voice trailed off, he sent a gold piece sailing through the air. It bounced at her feet on the stage.

Her eyes turned to the source of that offering. Calmly she thrust the coin off the stage with the toe of her gilded slipper, sent it rolling among the tables where patrons scrambled for it.

Buckman's small mouth froze. He settled back in his chair. Then he glanced up, and saw Silk.

Silk stared coldly back at him. Despite Buckman's sleek appearance, there was nothing soft about him. He was said to have killed four or five men in the past, and some of his victims had been knifed. Now, of course, he had the money to hire lesser men to do his killing. Silk identified the two who were with him now. One, Chain Jarrett, sorrel-haired, with a bullet pucker in his cheek, was a notorious gunman. The other was a little, tough desperado known as Blackie Hatch.

Silk spoke first. "I just got in from the Red Desert, Mitch. Brought some bad news for you. Comanche Cairns met some bad luck up in that country two days ago."

Buckman's eyes traveled over Silk. "Are you drunk, Callahan?" he shrugged. "Comanche Cairns? Am I supposed to know the fellow?"

"You know him, Mitch. I've been having a little trouble with my construction crews lately. Camps have been shot up by night riders, whisky has been showing up in the bunk tents, stock has been stampeded too many times to be accidental. I couldn't put my finger on the trouble until the other day.

"Then half a dozen white men dressed as Indians jumped my Five Mile camp on Red Desert. Killed one of my boys who was handling a scraper. We downed two of 'em. One lived long enough to talk a little—Comanche Cairns. Comanche said you'd given him orders to see that Great Western Mail never ran any stages through to Salt Lake."

MITCH BUCKMAN'S face was shinier than ever. He darted a glance at Chain Jarrett, but Jarrett was keeping both hands flat on the table. Chain Jarrett was fast, but he had seen Silk Callahan in action in the past.

"You're loco, Callahan," Buckman said. "Are you trying to start trouble between me and F. J. Leland's stagecoach outfit?"

"Uh-huh," Silk nodded. "Got any on tap?"

There was a silence.

"You snakeblood," Silk intoned. "Your freighting outfit is tied up with every whisky-runner in the Indian country. You're in with the Army grafters, and you own crooked poli-

ticians back East. You wanted this Julesburg-Salt Lake mail contract, but F. J. Leland got the call. So you aim to sandbag him with your paid killers and fake Indian raids until he has to forfeit the contract. Call off your wolf, Buckman. That's what I came to tell you. If you don't, I'll break you."

"You're a fool," Mitch Buckman said. "And fools die young."

"I'll outlive you, Mitch," Silk corrected softly. "That's a promise." He backed out of the booth, letting the curtain fall.

He paused outside for a moment, listening, and heard Buckman whisper, "Get that big hellion as he goes down the stairs. Hear me?"

Silk didn't move toward the main stairs by which he had ascended. He backed in the opposite direction, toward a dark little stairway that led down into the wings.

He heard the rustle of skirts, and Lucinda Morrow's voice spoke in his ear. "Silk Callahan! It's good to see you. You need a shave, but I'll kiss you anyway. It's been nearly a year since—"

Silk reached swiftly around, pushed her into an empty booth. "Stand clear, Lou," he murmured.

At that instant Chain Jarrett stepped from Mitch Buckman's booth twenty feet away. The gunman had a cocked six-shooter in his hand. He did not look toward Silk, but headed for the main stairway at the front.

Silk called, "Wrong direction, Chain."

Jarrett whirled, crouching a little. For the tiniest instant he hesitated, then pulled the gun around and opened fire.

Silk, jerking his own six-shooter, flattened against the wall. He felt Jarrett's first slug twitch at his canvas saddle coat. The second raked the wall just back of his neck.

His own gun was up now and roaring. His first slug missed as Jarrett weaved aside, but the next two tore through the man. Chain Jarrett fell forward on the red plush carpet.

## CHAPTER TWO

### New Graves in Julesburg

SILK shoved Lucinda down toward the stage wings and followed her, backing down the steps.

Two jugglers who had been in the midst of their act were still standing before the footlights, staring up at the balcony where that roar of gunfire had thundered. Out in the house the crowd suddenly broke into a babble of excitement.

Lucinda Morrow grabbed Silk's arm, pulled him to a nearby door. They stepped out into the darkness back of the building. "Get out of sight, Silk," the girl breathed. "Mitch Buckman has a tough crowd on his payroll. They'll be after you—they'll shoot you down, sure."

Silk took her hands, forced her to look at him. "Won't you ever quit, Lou?" he said gently. "Won't you ever give up? It isn't worth it."

Her eyes were suddenly glistening. Impulsively she kissed him on the mouth, then on the forehead. "You're making me spoil my makeup," she chattered shakily. "Quit looking at me like that, Silk, before I put on a real crying scene."

"We'll hold a celebration tomorrow," Silk told her. "Then you're leaving Julesburg. You don't belong in this kind of life, Lou. I promised Bob Larkin I'd look out for you, and I haven't forgotten. There—now I've done it for sure."

Lucinda had started to weep at the mention of that name. Five years ago she had been the toast of San Francisco, on her way to musical fame as the protege of a famous grand opera soprano. Then she had fallen in love with young, likeable Bob Larkin, a Missourian, who had come west with Silk in an overland trading venture.

Bob Larkin died in a gunfight the night before he and Lucinda Morrow were to have been married. A man named Duke Fitzhugh, who had a shady reputation as a bon vivant and pseudo-gentleman, had forced that fight upon him.

Fitzhugh had fled from San Francisco after the killing, knowing Silk was looking for him. And Lucinda Morrow abandoned her opera career, dropped out of sight. Silk found her a year later, singing in an El Paso gambling house. After that he had encountered her in other places—Leavenworth, Denver, Fort Smith, Saint Jo. . . .

She had never told Silk why she had chosen the career of a frontier entertainer. But Silk had seen the bitter purpose in her eyes. He knew she always carried a derringer. He knew that the girl who had once been the belle of San Francisco hoped some day to cross the trail of Duke Fitzhugh.

HE HELD her close against him, comforting her as best he could, but she pushed him away, insisting that he was in danger from Buckman's men. Silk left her at the stage door. Jawbone came out of the shadows. "You sure started the pot boilin'," he scolded admiringly.

Wary of a gun-trap, they circled through back streets, then made their way to the Overland House, where F. J. Leland, owner of Great Western Mail, had a room.

They mounted to the second floor, and Silk tapped on the door of the room Leland used as an unofficial office. A young voice, not Leland's, called, "Come in!"

Silk stepped in and looked around inquiringly. The only occupant was a young, husky

stranger who sat at F. J. Leland's desk. He wore a neat, freshly-pressed business suit, a stiff collar, white shirt and necktie.

"I'm lookin' for Leland," Silk said.

"I'm Leland. What's your business?"

"Damned if you haven't shed about thirty years since I saw you last, F. J.," Silk said caustically. "Reckon you must be in your second childhood."

"I'm F. J. Leland, Junior," the dark-haired man corrected, flushing in embarrassment. "Dad left a month ago on a trip to Washington, and put me in charge."

Silk remembered now that F. J. had mentioned a son who was attending Yale University. Looking closer, Silk saw the family resemblance. Frank Leland had inherited his father's stubborn jaw and brawny physique. But he looked out of place here in wild Julesburg.

"F. J. shucked it to Washington?" Silk scowled. "Then something's gone wrong. Speak up, man. I'm Silk Callahan. This is Jawbone Jenkins."

Frank Leland couldn't help staring at their worn garb. "I say," he remarked. "You two look like you've been roughing it for fair. Dad told me about you, of course."

"Sorry we neglected to put on our soup and fish," Silk snapped. "Why did F. J. go east?"

Leland's flush deepened. "Some flaw developed in the mail contract with the Government. Dad rushed to Washington to see the postmaster general. I received a telegram only a few minutes ago from him. Your arrival tonight was a very lucky break, Callahan. Dad told me to get in touch with you immediately. It seems a new time clause has been written in the contract. Dad says we must start daily service to Salt Lake on May first, otherwise the contract will be forfeited."

"May first. Hell's blue flames! That's only a little over three weeks away. We were supposed to have another month, and even that was barely enough. Let's see that message."

SILK grimly read the telegram which had come over the newly completed transcontinental wire. He looked at Jawbone. "F. J. says war is near," he said slowly. "The South is ready to secede. The Government demands that mail service be established with California at once over the Northern route. The Butterfield line, which operates mainly through Southern territory by way of El Paso and Yuma, is being abandoned."

War! Experienced stagecoach men had opposed the roundabout Butterfield stage line over the southern route, pointing out that the Overland trail was shorter. But politicians had their way. Now, with the North girding to meet the coming struggle, the Overland route, by necessity, was coming into its own.

"Buckman knows about this, you can bet your bottom dollar," Silk said between his teeth. "He's taken over the loans F. J. raised to get the company going. Chances are he's got his paid politicians back there to force this new time clause on us. He's in a position to take over Great Western Mail as a receiver if that contract is forfeited."

He looked at Frank Leland. "I'll need two hundred more men right away. I've got crews building relay stations, working on bridges and grading trail, but there's a hell of a lot still to be done. I located a route through the Medicine Bows by way of Diamondback Summit that'll cut eight or nine hours from our running time, but there's a stretch of tough construction work to be finished there. We can round up the men—provided you've got the money to meet the payroll."

Frank Leland chewed his lip. "Yes. . .," he said. "Will you wait just a minute?" He left, and Silk heard him tapping on the door of another room.

In a moment Leland returned with a fashionably-dressed, handsome dark-haired girl. Clear dark eyes looked at Silk with veiled amusement. She made an elaborate curtsey.

"Good evening, Mr. Callahan. And Jawbone Jenkins! What a charming surprise. This is quite a reunion."

"Then you three have met?" Leland said.

"Of course," the girl smiled. "Mr. Callahan and Jawbone helped my father establish the old Southwestern Express to Santa Fe, three years ago."

Silk spoke bluntly. "What are you doing here, Penny?"

Leland hastily answered that. "Penny—er—Miss Gilroy, has bought a partnership in Great Western. I have asked her to step in here to listen to your report."

Of all people and all places, Silk hadn't expected to run into Penny Gilroy here in F. J. Leland's office. Her father, Roarin' Bill Gilroy, had been an old-time stagecoach man who had pioneered a passenger line from Independence into New Mexico. Both Silk and Jawbone had helped Bill Gilroy get the line in operation. Then Roarin' Bill had died. With his death, the investors had become panicky. It was rumored that Bill Gilroy had no financial margin, that the new stageline was operating on a thin shoestring.

Creditors began to close in, ready to salvage what they could. Then Penny Gilroy had come west, bringing with her the most important creditors of the company. She had organized an inspection trip to Santa Fe to prove that the venture was sound.

SILK remembered that trip, for he had been in charge of the party's safety. Penny Gilroy had been a dazzling figure on that journey.

Her gowns and bonnets were a sensation on the frontier. She had worn diamonds at the gay dinners that were served at each overnight stop. She had charmed men with her wit and vivacity. The creditors had gone back East satisfied that Penny Gilroy was wealthy enough to protect their investments.

The contrast between Penny Gilroy, with her jewels and Paris gowns, and the horny-handed stagecoach drivers and station men all along that lonely trail to Santa Fe, had been all too pointed.

"See them hunks o' ice she's got hung on her like popcorn on a Christmas tree?" one tough division boss had said. "Every one of them stones represents a scalp some Cheyenne or Comanche lifted from a dead stage-driver or station tender. We eat dust an' risk our topknots while she feasts on terrapin an' wears jewelry an' plays the lady fer a bunch of white-collared dudes."

Because he felt obligated to the memory of her father, Silk had taken that division boss to a fist-trimming. Then he had gone to Penny Gilroy and resigned.

"I reckon you don't need me any longer," he had said. "You seem able to get by on your shape."

Penny Gilroy had slapped his face. It was two years since that night, but Silk could still remember the burning force of the blow as he stood there facing her, a thousand miles from the scene of their last meeting.

"So you're a partner in Great Western Mail now?" Silk said slowly. "What about Southwestern Express?"

"Out of existence," she said coolly. "I sold all hoof and rolling stock three months ago. Too much Comanche trouble."

"Injuns don't respect diamonds, I reckon," Silk commented.

"Listen, Callahan," Leland said curtly. "Our financial situation was none too bright until Miss Gilroy came to our assistance. Dad insisted that she accept a partnership in return for investing her money."

"Maybe you don't savvy what you're getting into," Silk warned. "Mitch Buckman is out to bust Great Western."

"Buckman?" The girl looked up from a small hand mirror. "Mitch Buckman is trying to get his claws in the stagecoach business? Are you sure?"

"I helped trade lead with some of Buckman's outfit on the Red Desert the other day. One lived long enough to spill the beans. And I just had a little argument with another of Buckman's gun-slingers a few minutes ago at the Silver Slipper," Silk added quietly. "I had to kill him."

"What?" Leland looked incredulous. "You just killed a man, and you stand there telling

about it as though—as though it were just nothing."

Penny Gilroy spoke sharply. "Don't be a fool, Frank. Don't try to judge men by how they look."

She arose and came close to Silk, studying him with her serious dark eyes. She was taller than average, and moved with a lithe, shapely stride. Her thick, dark hair was fixed in a plaited coronet.

She had always been able to analyze Silk's mood correctly. "I knew something had happened the minute I looked at you," she said. "You have killed a man tonight—and kissed a woman. Trouble loves you, doesn't it, Callahan? And evidently some woman must love you too."

She reached up with a kerchief, rubbed it across his mouth and forehead where Lucinda Morrow's lips, with their heavy stage makeup, had rested. She looked at the crimson evidence.

Annoyed, Silk swung away from her. He spoke to Jawbone and Frank Leland. "We've got to start rolling. Jawbone, shag down to the barns. Roust out Tim O'Shane. Round up every man in Julesburg who'll hire out to swing a pick and shovel. Leland, wire Sid Chalmers at Denver to get another hundred men and start 'em by wagon for Rock Creek. I'll meet 'em there. We'll beg, borrow or steal every tool and scraper in Julesburg tonight. Arrange for grub and camp equipment for two hundred men. Use every freight wagon. We've got two months' work to do in three weeks' time."

He eyed Leland. "You said you had the cash?"

Leland hesitated, looking anxiously at Penny Gilroy. She pondered a moment, then nodded. "I can raise ten thousand more in a pinch."

Silk frowned. "I didn't know F. J. was that bad off for money," he said.

"Expenses have been far heavier than Dad estimated," Frank Leland admitted. "If Penny hadn't come to our help. . . ."

He didn't finish it. His hand reached out, closed over Penny Gilroy's slim fingers in a gesture of understanding.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Return of the Killer

A HEAVY hand rapped on the door. It was Dave Wyatt, a deputy United States Marshal. Wyatt was a veteran peace officer, with a reputation for square dealing. "Better come down to the Silver Slipper, Silk," he said. "Mitch Buckman is askin' for a murder warrant agin you. Wants me to put you in jail."

"Jarrett fired the first shot," Silk said. "He had a gun in his hand. He thought he was going to shoot me in the back as I left by way of the front stairs. I went in the other direction, and fooled him. He asked for it. He cracked two caps before I could even get my gun out. See this bullet-burn on my jacket?"

"Got any witnesses?"

Silk hesitated, thinking of Lucinda Morrow. He shook his head. "I guess not."

"Better come along, Silk. We'll thrash it out. Give me your gun, peaceful. If it looks like they got a case agin you I'll jug you. If not, I don't waste time bringin' innocent men to trial."

"To hell with that," old Jawbone snarled. "Buckman will try to perjure you into a noose, Silk. He wants you out o' the way."

"I'll take care of this," Silk said. "You go to the barns, Jawbone, and do what I told you."

Silk headed for the door. "Let's go," he nodded to the marshal. "But I'm keeping my gun. It's the only life insurance I ever carry."

Frank Leland grabbed up his hat. "I'll act as your attorney, Callahan. I have my degree in law, you know."

A crowd trailed into the Silver Slipper at their heels, jamming the place. Chain Jarrett's body had been brought to the main floor, and lay on a table, covered by a buffalo robe. The crowd climbed on chairs and tables around a cleared space where the body lay. Gamblers and barmen had quit their places and joined the onlookers.

Mitch Buckman was present, surrounded by a bodyguard. Blackie Hatch was there, and Frog Devers, and three or four other men Silk knew.

Then Silk's eyes narrowed as he peered at a tall, thin-lipped man with sideburns and a little dark mustache who stood at Buckman's side. He wore a gray cloth top hat, and a fashionable long, double-breasted coat.

"Who's the dressed-up party with the sideburns?" he murmured to Dave Wyatt.

"Name of Tex Jennings," the marshal said. "Just hit town yesterday. I'm told he's one of Buckman's sègundos who's been brought to Julesburg to take charge of the freight yards here."

Tex Jennings, hell, Silk thought. Whatever he called himself now, this slim, elegant man was the same Duke Fitzhugh who had shot Lucinda Morrow's sweetheart five years ago.

Silk's eyes met the man's sardonic gaze. Fitzhugh recognized him as well, Silk knew. He looked around. There was no sign of Lucinda Morrow.

DAVE WYATT wasted no time. He motioned Mitch Buckman to step forward. "You're accusing Callahan of shooting Chain

Jarrett from a sneak, Buckman. Let's hear your story."

"It was a dirty murder," Mitch Buckman said. "Callahan barged into our booth, seemed to have an old grudge against Chain. When Chain ignored him, he went away. He waited outside the booth and opened up on Chain when he stepped out a few minutes later. Chain didn't have a chance."

"I'm insulted, Mitch," Silk commented dryly. "You're accusing me of being a bum shot. If I'd turned loose first, Chain wouldn't ever have been able to shake three bullets from his gun."

The crowd stirred. A lane opened. Lucinda Morrow came walking into the cleared space. She had changed from her stage costume to a jacket suit with a crinolined, wide skirt. A poke bonnet was set on her golden hair.

"I saw the whole thing, Mr. Wyatt," she said. "Jarrett fired twice at Silk before Silk could defend himself. Jarrett missed. Silk didn't."

"Who'd believe a music-hall harpy?" Mitch Buckman shouted. "She's in love with Silk Callahan, most likely—she's lying to get him out of this murder charge!"

With a growl Silk took a stride toward Buckman. To his surprise Frank Leland, who was nearer, moved in ahead of him. Leland grabbed Buckman by the front of his fine coat, jerked him around. "Keep a decent tongue in your head when you address a lady, sir," he snapped.

He released Buckman. Turning, he took Lucinda's hand, led her into the center of the circle. "Now, Miss—"

"Lucinda Morrow," the girl said, staring at the good-looking, wide-shouldered man.

"You were an eyewitness to this shooting, the only witness I believe? Tell what you saw, in your own words."

The room was silent as the fair-haired girl told the story of Chain Jarrett's death.

"That will be all," Leland said triumphantly. "Thank you, Miss Morrow."

"Any other evidence?" Dave Wyatt asked.

There was none. "I don't see any reason for holdin' Callahan," the marshal announced. "Clear case of self-defense."

Leland gallantly offered Lucinda his arm, and she accepted with a smile. Then her glance passed over Duke Fitzhugh's face. Silk saw all color drain from her cheeks. Her hand fell from Leland's arm. She stood there motionless while Silk watched the changing emotions that played over her face.

This was the end of five years of desolation for her, five years of devotion to the vow she had made herself. Her hand was the color of wax as it rose slowly to the bosom of her dress.

SILK moved in, reaching out, his fingers closing on her wrist. "No, Lou," he breathed.

She looked at him from dead eyes that were seeing things in the past, remembering the day that was to have been her wedding day. Then she came back to reality. Silk linked his arms in hers, steadying her.

"All right, Silk," she murmured shakily.

Frank Leland, still holding her arm, was bewildered, not understanding. Then a new arrival pushed them both aside, and took charge of Lucinda.

It was Penny Gilroy. Silk had not known she had followed them to the Silver Slipper. He realized she must have been in the background, listening to the informal hearing.

She put an arm around Lucinda's waist. "I'm Penelope Gilroy. There! Lean against me. I know you want to do some crying. Wait until we get away from this crowd. Then you can have it out."

Silk and Leland followed as Lucinda and the dark-haired girl walked out of the Silver Slipper through staring ranks of roughly-clad men.

Mitch Buckman was waiting outside. With him stood the saturnine Fitzhugh, while the rest of his gunmen waited in the background. Silk motioned the girls to go on.

Duke Fitzhugh moved into Leland's path, halting him. Silk saw what was coming, but there was nothing he could do now to stop it.

Fitzhugh spoke, and the pattern was as old as time. "How much did you pay your killer to rub out Chain Jarrett, Leland?"

Silk tried to intervene. "You're choosing the wrong man, mister. How about picking on me?"

"I never deal with hired hands," Fitzhugh sneered. "Leland is boss of Great Western Mail, trying to fill the shoes of his father who didn't have the sand to finish what he started. He went out of his way to pick trouble with my friend Mitchell Buckman, who's twenty years older and not a fighting man. He pushed my friend around. He's found his trouble now. Here it is."

Frank Leland was a little pale. "What does the fellow want, Callahan?" he asked. "Do I square off with him?"

Fitzhugh slapped him in the face. Leland started a right swing instantly, but Silk grabbed him, shoving him back. Tex Jennings had already started his draw.

"It won't be that easy, Jennings, or Fitzhugh, or whatever name you use nowadays," Silk said. "Leland isn't armed."

"All right," the man snapped. "We'll make it at daybreak, then. With guns, down by the river."

"You've named your game," Slip nodded. "At forty paces, facing each other with guns

in your hands. Each man to fire until he's ready to quit. You've written your ticket, Jennings."

HE took Leland's arm and marched him away. The girls had gone on ahead into the Overland House.

"Am I right in believing I am expected to meet that chap in a gun duel?" Leland asked incredulously.

"Yeah. You've been braced by an expert killer. Fitzhugh is being paid to wipe you out. As the acting head of Great Western Mail, Buckman aims to get rid of you—by one means or another."

"That's—that's fantastic!" Leland said, amazed and troubled. "I never laid eyes on the man before in my life."

"He slapped you. Half the population saw it. Ever fire a gun at a man, Leland?"

"Why—why no. I've used a pistol, of course. But only for sport. Target practice."

"We better brush up on your shooting. There's a half-moon coming up. We'll find a place down by the river and burn a little powder."

A silence came. "I see what you meant when you said Buckman aimed to get rid of me by one means or another," Leland said slowly. "Chaps like you have your own code on the frontier. I'm a yellow dog if I refuse to make a target of myself for this fellow. The company would be in disgrace. Nobody would want to work for an outfit run by a coward."

"For a lawyer, you can sum up the case in plain words," Silk nodded reluctantly.

Leland had a wry look on his handsome face. "I'll have to borrow a gun somewhere," he said, and sighed a little. "I don't happen to own one."

Silk gripped him by the shoulders, swung him around until they were eye to eye. "I had you pegged wrong, Leland," he said. "Look. You can do this thing. It only takes one bullet. I've got a gun that will shoot straight, and won't miss fire."

They clasped hands.

The two girls were waiting for them at the Overland House. Silk saw the anxiety in their eyes, but they sensed that questions would be futile.

"Lucinda is moving in with me," Penny Gilroy said quietly. "It will be company for both of us."

Silk nodded. There was danger for the sunny-haired girl in Julesburg now. Mitch Buckman might try to pay her off for interfering in his plans. He guessed this thought was in Penny Gilroy's mind also. The knowledge that Penny was looking out for Lucinda helped lighten some of the burden on his own shoulders. Penny was a selfish, pampered girl, but she aroused Silk's confidence in spite of himself.

Lucinda offered her hand to Leland as she said good night. "I—I hope I haven't got you into trouble," she said, her eyes shadowed.

"None we can't handle," Leland assured her. He escorted them to their room. There was a faraway look in his eyes when he returned.

"A very attractive girl," he said thoughtfully.

"Which one?" Silk remarked dryly. "The blonde or the brunette?"

Leland eyed him speculatively. "Both," he said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ordeal for a Greenhorn

SILK and Leland dismounted at dawn on the cheerless shore of the muddy South Platte a mile out of Julesburg. Jawbone had come with them, and Tim O'Shane, the shaggy-haired boss of the stage yards.

Fitzhugh was already on hand, standing with Mitch Buckman and three other men in a grim group. Fitzhugh wore dead black clothing, even to his shirt.

A bleak wind rustled the scant wisps of brush. The cold, slate-colored river babbled a monotonous dirge as it rushed along in its channel.

"We're ready," Silk said.

A score of spectators had appeared, standing at a respectful distance. The positions were paced off.

Leland had put in some practice with a gun in the moonlight, Silk giving him advice. Silk shook hands with him now. "Make that first one count, Frank," he counseled. "It's just like pointing your finger."

Leland was pale, quivering a little with tension. But there was no panic in him. He moved to the position assigned. He had dressed carefully, choosing a dark sack suit and a white shirt. He was bareheaded, and the breeze ruffled his dark hair.

Fitzhugh was icily confident as he moved to the mark. Six-shooters dangled downward in the hands of both men.

"Ready!"

Leland drew a steady breath, then exhaled as Silk had instructed him. Fitzhugh turned so that only his side faced his opponent.

"Fire!"

Fitzhugh's gun leaped up, belching flame. The man was shooting fast in an attempt to get the first slug home and unnerve his opponent.

It was split-second action, but it seemed like an age to Silk. He expected Leland to go down. Then Leland, who had swung his gun

up methodically, thumbed the hammer once.

Duke Fitzhugh's third bullet was on its way as Leland fired. Fitzhugh did not shoot again. An invisible force hit him a sledging blow, hurling him back. He balanced for a moment, trying to brace himself, like a man pushing at an obstacle. Then his body suddenly crumpled to the ground.

Frank Leland stood there, a trickle of blood dripping from an ear-lobe that had been nicked by one of Jennings' bullets. It was the only injury he had received.

SILK'S attention raced to Mitch Buckman and his gun-crew. They had stood frozen an instant, staring unbelievingly at Fitzhugh's body. Now Buckman uttered an oath and jerked around, glaring at Leland.

Silk's gun flipped out, and he eared back the hammer. Jawbone and Tim O'Shane also drew.

"You want to take it up now, Mitch?" Silk said icily. "We're ready."

Buckman assayed his chances. The odds were even—and that was not the way he liked them. His body slacked and he turned away. He led his men to their horses; they mounted and headed back to Julesburg.

Jawbone brought up their own mounts. Silk had to steer Leland's foot to the stirrup, for reaction was hitting the young lawyer. He was shaking violently, but he steadied as they headed for town.

Suddenly Silk shouted, pointing. A black billow of smoke was rolling into the dawn above Julesburg.

"Glory be!" Tim O'Shane screeched. " 'Tis one of our stock barns goin' up in flames."

They raked their horses, speeding to the fire. The barn was one where a score of horses trained to stagecoach work had been kept. It was a mass of flames as Silk hit the ground.

Yard men and hostlers were racing around, forming bucket brigades to prevent the fire from sweeping the yards.

A few of the horses had been led out of the burning barn, but a dozen animals were beyond reach, already dead in the fire. Every one was a two-forty animal or better, and worth at least six hundred dollars.

"Somebody touched 'er off, Silk," a smoke-blackened barn man said when it was over. "The fire started at both ends o' the barn at the same time."

Silk looked at Frank Leland, who was soaked with water, his immaculate garb in ruins. He had been working with a bucket brigade.

"You savvy what we're up against now," he commented, wiping a grimy hand across his forehead. "It could have been worse, if the wind had shifted a little. The whole yard would have gone, wagons, hay and coaches. We'll put gun-guards over the yards from now on. Nobody gets near the place without authorization from you or me."

Lucinda and Penny Gilroy were on hand. The story of the duel was now common knowledge in Julesburg. They knew Frank Leland had killed the man known as Tex Jennings.

There was a warm look in Penny Gilroy's dark eyes, and Lucinda's gaze kept following the big, square-jawed Leland.

Silk turned away, leaving them with Leland. He tried to occupy himself with the urgent business of organizing the new crews of construction men who were signing up to head west and help rush the stage trail through to Fort Bridger.

But he could not escape a sense of loneliness as he remembered the way the two handsome girls had looked at Leland. Within him was an emptiness, a feeling of incompleteness and a longing he had never before known.

NEXT morning Silk saddled up at dawn and headed westward. Crews of hastily recruited workmen were moving in the same direction, traveling in wagons that were weighted down with tools and camp supplies.

Silk became a man-driver. He did his sleeping in the saddle from then on. Pushing on day by day he spared neither horses nor men as he reinforced the previous crews along the new trail that was being blazed across Red Desert and the Medicine Bows.

Dirt began to fly along a three-hundred-mile stretch as far as Ham's Fork, where the cut-off intercepted the established Overland Trail. Work was rushed on bridges across streams that could not be forded. Black powder thundered in rough country, ripping out boulders. Stage stations, corrals and barns were rushed to completion. Feed was freighted in and the stations were equipped and manned as fast as they were made ready.

Diamondback Canyon through the Medicine Bows was the toughest construction job on the route. There a trail had to be pioneered up a five-mile canyon through rock slides and solid scarp. Silk, satisfied the job was moving along west of the mountains, came riding back out of the Red Desert to take personal charge of the Diamondback crew.

Only ten days remained before the first stage must leave Julesburg to connect at Salt Lake with the line to California. Silk had already sent word back to Jawbone at Julesburg to begin stocking the stations with relay teams, coaches and drivers.

During these past ten days of steady riding and hectic organization he had heard no word from headquarters at Julesburg; but he had not forgotten Mitch Buckman.

Riding east across the sagebrush desert he

discovered that Buckman was still at work. A crew working on a rough stretch of malpais had been jumped at dark by a gang of white men sketchily disguised as Indians. Two construction hands had been killed and the remainder had been terrorized into quitting and heading back to Julesburg. All tools and equipment had been burned.

Farther along, a new bridge across a coulee had been burned. At other camps Silk found the workmen drunk and idle. Free whisky had appeared from some mysterious source, and the irresponsible laborers had gone on a roaring drunk.

Silk hunted out the cached kegs, smashed them and served notice he would kill any whisky runners he found near a Great Western Mail camp. He fired two foreman he suspected of helping smuggle rotgut to the men.

One of them, a hulking Irishman, challenged Silk to fight it out with his fists. Silk took that tarrier to a cleaning in whirlwind fashion, finishing up by kicking him out of camp, leaving him to make it back to Julesburg on foot.

He knew the man had Mitch Buckman's money in his pocket. That free whisky had been paid for and brought into the camps by Buckman's men.

And he knew the odds against him were narrowing to a knife-edge margin as he rode into the construction camp near the summit of Diamondback Pass, only a week before the deadline.

Dismounting, he stared at the dark-haired, strapping man who came striding up, offering a freshly-calloused hand. It was Frank Leland, but not the immaculate Frand Leland of Julesburg. He wore a hickory shirt and rough breeches and brogans that were scarred by brush and rocks. He needed a shave, and he packed a six-shooter on his hip.

"I took charge of this Diamondback job a week ago, Silk," Leland grinned. "We got word in Julesburg that this gang was loafing. I hit the trail the following morning. I fired the gang boss and a couple of trouble-makers, and ran them out of camp. Things are going better now."

SILK'S grin faded as he looked past Leland at two riders who came loping to meet him. "What's this?"

The arrivals were Penny Gilroy and Lucinda, Penny in a man's shirt and breeches, Lucinda decorously side-saddle.

"They insisted on coming with me," Leland explained. "And I really thought they'd be safer where I could keep an eye on 'em."

Penny swung lithely down, moving with that long-limbed grace he could never forget. "Am I embarrassing you with this brazen costume?" she asked, her eyes twinkling. "If it offends you that much, Silk dear, you can turn around and look in some other direction."

"I can stand it if you can," Silk told her. "Did you bring your diamonds along? They'll look real nice on you in a construction camp. You'd dazzle the hell out of these tarriers in the pick and shovel gang."

"Do you really think so, Silk?" she cooed. "I do want to make an impression."

"Hold on, you two," Leland protested. "Haven't we got enough grief with Buckman trying to hamstring us, and Spotted Elk and his Brules acting ugly, without you two starting to swing on each other?"

Silk turned. "What? The Brules? But I smoked a pipe with Spotted Elk, not two months ago. I gave him five ponies as a gift from your father and explained to him that the stage line would only pass through his country, that the passengers were bound for California, and were not settlers. Spotted Elk was satisfied, said he wouldn't start trouble."

"He hasn't actually raised any row yet," Leland said. "But he's camped only a few miles away with a big bunch of braves. The men are nervous. Half a dozen of 'em quit the job last night, and started for Julesburg. Said they didn't intend to risk their scalps any longer if an Indian war broke out. I don't—"

Silk pointed suddenly. From where they stood they had a view down the canyon. The rough work was being finished on the rude stage-trail that had been blasted up the grade. Crews were prying boulders and loose rock off the road, working with picks and crowbars. Now, down there, men were suddenly dropping their tools and racing to pick up six-shooters and rifles.

"Injuns, bejabers," a man bawled. "Take cover, b'ys."

A ridge overlooking the construction work seemed suddenly to come to life. A chattering, primitive uproar rolled through the sundown. The ridge was alive with brown, breech-clouted riders on ponies. Brule Indians.

Silk hit the saddle and raced among the panicky construction men.

"Hold your fire!" he bawled. "They're not attacking yet. They're young braves, not warriors. They're only making a demonstration."

HE KEPT repeating his order, up and down the line. Silk knew Indians. Those young Brules up there were aching for an excuse to jump the white men. They still had their first scalp to take. But they didn't have the backing of the older warriors, evidently. At least there were no feathers in sight up there.

But one excited man could play havoc now. A single shot, and hell would break loose.

There were only two score of white men, and there were more than a hundred braves in sight on the rim.

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TWENTY YEARS OF
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Silk's counsel prevailed. The crew steadied, and waited. The braves continued taunting the white men, shouting threats in the Sioux tongue, boasting of their own prowess. Silk understood enough of the Brule psychology to know that it was only a bluff—so far.

"Keep cool," he told the men. "Go back to work, but keep your guns handy. Ignore 'em. They'll give it up and go away when they get tired of putting on a show."

A wizened buckskin-shirted man named Baldy Greene, who hunted game for the camps, spoke up. "Take a peek, Silk. Some warriors are showin' up now. An' there's Spotted Elk himself, ef I ain't mistaken."

Feathered heads had appeared. Silk singled out one stocky Brule. It was Spotted Elk, the chief with whom he had pow-wowed the past winter. Spotted Elk was a noted chief, whose voice was heeded at all council fires on the plains. He had made it clear that he meant to fight any inroads into the buffalo country north of the old immigrant trail, and he was only half-reconciled to permitting travel over this new stage line south of it.

Silk lifted his hand in the peace sign, but Spotted Elk did not respond.

"I seen Jim Crowfoot, that halfbreed that works for Mitch Buckman, in the Brule camp yesterday when I scouted it with field-glasses," said Baldy Greene.

"That's the answer," Silk said grimly. "I know Crowfoot. He's married to a Brule woman, and he's part Indian himself. Buckman sent him to prod Spotted Elk into putting a stop to work on the stage-trail. But Spotted Elk hasn't made up his mind yet."

Silk knew they were sitting on a powder mine. Spotted Elk had the fighting strength to wipe out everything that had been accomplished on the stage-trail, close it to all travel as long as he chose. All American troops east of Bridger had been pulled out of the Indian country because of the oncoming struggle whose clouds blackened the sky east of the Mississippi. The white man's grip on this stretch of Indian country had grown thin and feeble.

Then came the thing Silk had feared above everything. A rifle shot sent a thin, nerve-chilling ripple of echoes through the canyon. The wail of the bullet was a sinister overtone.

Up on the ridge a Brule brave who looked to be no more than a stripling reeled drunkenly on his pony, then toppled to the ground.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Cold Steel!

AN INSTANT of frozen silence followed that shot. Silk's glance raced around. He glimpsed a thin haze of powdersmoke drifting from a promontory across the canyon. It wasn't one of his men who had fired. Some hidden sharpshooter, safely out of reach of the Indians' wrath, had picked off that young Brule.

Silk didn't need to be told that it was one of Buckman's men who had fired, hoping the stagecoach crew would have to pay the piper.

Silk suddenly touched steel to his horse. Before anyone could stop him, he sent the animal lurching up the steep ascent toward the Brules above.

He lifted his voice, speaking Brule. "Wait, Spotted Elk. That shot was not fired by any man who works for the swift wagons. It was an enemy of both the Sioux and of the swift wagons, who wants to see the blood of brave Brules and brave white men flow uselessly."

Wild confusion had swept the Indians. Silk knew the chances were that he would be riddled, scalped and mutilated if their wrath centered upon him.

His boldness took them a little off guard. But as he topped the ascent, young braves came thundering to surround him, screeching their hatred.

Silk spoke only to Spotted Elk, ignoring them. "Would you let your young men scalp one who comes as a friend? Hear me out, Spotted Elk."

Spotted Elk gave a sharp order and the braves, disappointed, veered away.

Now a full-grown warrior came riding at Silk, brandishing a knife. He threw his pony back and his knife darted back and forth before Silk's eyes. The blade almost grazed his hair.

"I will kill the white man, eat his heart, soak my moccasins in his blood!" the Brule spat.

Silk knew this Indian. He was Pony Track, a young war chief who had always been a bitter enemy of the white men. Pony Track was a magnificent specimen of his race—a six-footer, deep-chested, with the grace of a tiger.

Silk did not move. Ignoring Pony Track, he looked at the young brave who had been shot. The young Indian was only wounded. He was sitting on the ground now, his head hanging, blood oozing from one shoulder.

"That was a treacherous act by a skulking enemy who feared to face the Brules," Silk said.

Pony Track spoke. "He would draw the smoke over your eyes, Spotted Elk, while his men prepare for battle against us. Give the word, and I will slay him with my own hands."

"I sorrow for the brave who was injured by this treachery," Silk went on. "I rejoice to see that he will live to make his father proud of him on the hunting trails. It would not be right that many Brules should die, and

many white men die, because of this thing."

"The white man is a coward," Pony Track raged. "He speaks falsehoods."

"Pony Track uses the big tongue when he has many warriors at his back and is facing only one man," Silk said scornfully.

"I will break the white man across my knees as I would break a twig!" Pony Track spat.

SILK looked for the first time at the angry warrior. "Let it be so, Pony Track," he said. "We will meet in combat, with only knives as our weapons. If you are such a mighty warrior, then the wounding of the brave will be avenged with my life. If I am victorious, then you will know I do not lie."

Spotted Elk considered that, and all the Indians awaited, suddenly eager. A personal duel appealed to the wild nature of these men of the plains. Then the chief nodded.

Silk pointed to a flat promontory nearby. "I will come there and await Pony Track as soon as I can prepare for this meeting."

Returning to the canyon, he rode to the camp. He motioned Leland and entered the cook shack, leaving Penny and Lucinda staring, not understanding.

Silk stripped to the waist. "Grease my body," he instructed. "Somebody fetch that skinning knife that Baldy Greene carries."

Tersely he explained what he was facing. "Better this way than a pitched battle in which everybody might be wiped out," he remarked. "It'll stave off an Indian war, at any rate."

With only the knife in his belt he walked out, vaulted into the saddle. Penny Gilroy came racing to his side. She seized his arm, tried to hold him. "I know what you're up to!" she panted. "It's a duel with some Indian. Don't risk it, Silk! Why should you face danger alone for the sake of the rest of us? We'll all fight it out!"

Silk gently removed her hand. He held her two hands in his grasp an instant.

"You're a beautiful woman, Penny," he said. "I was wrong about some things back there at Independence two years ago. I know that now. Leland is all right. You'll have yourself a real man if you win him."

Then he rode away, not looking back. He mounted to the flat promontory which overlooked the construction camp. The Brules were massed at a distance beyond.

Pony Track came riding to the scene of the duel, chanting a war song. He wore only a breechclout, and his greased body glinted like polished copper in the afterglow of sunset.

Silk touched his horse, and they rode toward each other, slowly at first, and then at full speed. They hurled their mounts to a stop as they came together.

Pony Track left his pad saddle like a striking hawk. His knife flashed, and Silk could only partly knock that thrust aside. The keen blade found his shoulder, and he felt the warm spurt of blood.

HE LEFT his horse, hitting the ground on the balls of his feet. He faded aside as the Indian came at him again with lightning speed. Pony Track was a flitting shadow, darting around him, seeking an opening for that keen, thin blade that would slit a jugular vein at a touch.

Silk realized the Indian was faster than he. His only hope was to grab that knife-arm, and match his own strength against his opponent's.

He circled, backed away from another snake-fast rush. The Indian kept pressing in, seeking to drive him toward the outer rim of the promontory which dropped away in a sheer fall of thirty feet or more down the canyon side.

Silk continued backing until they were confined at close quarters. Pony Track came at him again, and this time he did not retreat. Instead, his body lunged ahead to meet that rush.

Silk's left arm darted out, and his fingers closed on the Brule's knife-arm. In that instant he might have buried his own blade in the warrior's throat, for Pony Track had been taken by surprise.

Instead Silk whirled, locking the captured arm over his shoulder. He sent Pony Track spinning over his head in a flying mare. The Brule crashed flat on his back on the ground.

Silk was upon him before he could recover. His boot crushed Pony Track's wrist. The Indian's fingers released the knife. Silk kicked it out of reach. He pinned Pony Track down, his knees on his victim's chest.

Pony Track expected to die. He was helpless, unable to defend himself as he looked up at the knife in Silk's hand.

Silk brought the weapon down. He let the point draw blood on Pony Track's chest. That slight wound would avert disgrace for the warrior. Then he arose. "It is finished, Pony Track," he said. "You have drawn my blood, and I have drawn yours. I do not wish to kill a brave warrior. I will be your friend, if you want it so."

The warrior got to his feet. He stood an instant looking at Silk with inscrutable black eyes. Then he turned and walked toward where his tribesmen were waiting in silence. Pony Track caught up his horse, and joined the Brules as they turned and rode away.

Silk caught up his own mount. Penny Gilroy came racing to the rim to meet him, followed by Leland and Lucinda and the jubilant construction men.

Lucinda kissed Silk and wept a little. Leland clasped his hand. Penny Gilroy did not say anything. She turned her horse and rode alongside him back to camp. With steady hands she cleansed and doctored the four-inch knife slash in Silk's shoulder, and drew stitches through it.

She finished the bandage, then slumped down at Silk's feet. She had fainted dead away.

Silk carried her to her tent. Her eyes opened, and she looked up into his face. "Callahan," she murmured shakily. "You're such a worry to those who—to those who know you. Trouble follows you. You were born under a star of violence. I don't want to have to live through anything like that again."

Silk never knew what he might have said. Something he'd have regretted, no doubt. Penny Gilroy's dark eyes, and her soft lips were dangerously near.

OUTSIDE a man raced by, shouting Silk's name. He turned and hurried out. It was a messenger from the Mud Springs station, fifty miles east.

"Hell to pay all down the line as fur as Lodgepole Crick, Silk," the man said. "Three camps has been shot up, and a couple of stations burned. They jumped Mud Springs at daybreak this mornin', made a sieve out of the bunk tent and killed a Swede. I picked off one of the bushwhackers with a Sharps as they was pullin' out. Got him dead center. It was a tough bullwhacker that used to freight for Mitch Buckman."

"He was still working for Buckman," Silk said grimly.

He saddled a fresh horse and rode away into the twilight. He went thirty-six hours without rest while he reorganized demoralized construction gangs. Half of the crews had quit, unnerved by the bushwhackings, but the toughest and best men were still standing firm.

"We'll stick till hell freezes over," a big, gangling Kansan at one camp told Silk. "The Rebs fired on a place called Fort Sumter a couple weeks ago. This stage line to California means a lot to the Union now. It'll sort of help hold the nation together."

"The South fired on a government fort?" Silk was tight-lipped. "Are you sure?"

"A rider come through yesterday bringin' the word."

Silk was heavy-hearted. He knew the fighting quality of men below the Mason-Dixon line. It would be a long and bloody war.

But he had a war of his own to fight, and it was on in full violence. With the deadline near, Mitch Buckner was throwing everything he had into his guerilla campaign to smash Great Western Mail.

Bushwhackings and raids harrassed camps all along the line. But crews were now stubbornly making their stand, working like mad to finish off the stage-trail. The route was now at least passable—even Diamondback Canyon, though it was not a finished trail by any stretch of the imagination.

The deadline was now only four days away. Silk sent word along the line that the first stage would come through on schedule. Then he headed for Julesburg. Leland rode at his side along with Penny and Lucinda.

"Buckman will do his damndest to stop that first stage," Leland predicted grimly. "We've checked the play to him each time thus far, but we're down to cases now. If we forfeit that contract we're through. Buckman has bought up all the loans Dad raised. He'll take over the company, unless we get that mail revenue. Worse than that, Penny stands to lose everything if we go under. She even sold those phony diamonds she owned to help meet the payrolls of these extra construction gangs."

SILK'S weary head lifted. He stared at Penny. "Phony diamonds?" he exploded. "Don't tell me those sparklers you packed around with you were made out of glass!"

She nodded calmly. "They were fair imitations, but they weren't the real thing—not even back in Independence when I wore them to dazzle the creditors of the old Southwestern Express. I never said they were diamonds. I only let people draw their own conclusions."

Silk kept looking at her. "You ran a high blaze, huh?" he said. "You wore fake diamonds and dressed like a queen to make 'em believe you had plenty of chips. A gambler's bluff."

"Something like that," she admitted. "I knew the company was sound if it was left alone. I had exactly thirty-two dollars and a few odd cents in my purse after I got back from that inspection trip to Santa Fe. That and some fine clothes and some phony diamonds."

Silk was thinking of the bullwhackers and silk-poppers on the old Southwestern Express who had denounced Penny for extravagance. Actually, she had been playing a role to save their jobs for them.

Penny Gilroy's cheeks were coloring a little. She rode on, carefully looking straight ahead.

There never had been any doubt in Silk's mind that Penny was in love with Frank Leland. He had taken that for granted from the first. He found himself fighting off a sudden flaming resentment. Lucinda Morrow, also, was plainly finding pleasure in Leland's company.

Silk couldn't blame them. Leland was all man. He was college-educated, sure to make his mark in the world. And what about Silk

Callahan, the trouble-shooter? Silk looked back over his years of wandering, of stage-coaching and freighting and bullwhacking and Indian fighting.

He felt old and empty. The weariness of these weeks of battling for Great Western Mail hit him now like a blow. He rode listlessly along down the trail to Julesburg.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Stage-Trail to Hell

IT WAS daybreak of the first day of May. Silk and Frank Leland stood alongside a shining new Concord coach in the mud of Julesburg's street. The postmaster was locking mail sacks, checking them as they were loaded into the boot.

The first Great Western Mail stage would pull out in fifteen minutes, bound for Salt Lake City. Gamblers had been betting in the barrooms the previous night that no Great Western coach would ever complete its run. Odds of ten to one had been offered, and there had been few takers.

Silk was stony-faced. He was driving this stage through personally, even as far as Bridger, if necessary. Frank Leland and Jawbone were riding with him as gun-guards. Tim O'Shane and half a dozen loyal, armed men would start with the stage as outriders, but there was no saddle stock up the line to relay such protection through to Bridger.

There were no pay fares. Nobody wanted the honor of buying the first passage over the new stage-trail.

Silk and Leland climbed to the box, and Jawbone took his place inside. Silk peered hopefully. He had expected Penny and Lucinda to appear and wish them luck. But there was no sign of them. Evidently they were still asleep in their room at the Overland House.

Silk hid his disappointment. He kicked off the brake and said, "So long!"

The barn men lifted a cheer. They tried to make it lusty, but only succeeded in sounding doleful. None of them expected to see any of the stage crew alive again.

Mitch Buckman was still missing from Julesburg, along with a score of toughs who had dropped out of sight along with him at the time the raids had started on the construction camps. It was a foregone conclusion that Buckman and his outfit would be lurking somewhere up the trail to see that no Great Western stage got through.

"Hike!" Silk barked. The team was made up of matched bays, and every horse had been timed in a two-thirty mile or better. The animals hit stride, and the Concord, glittering in its unsullied varnish, was rolling.

Silk and Leland glanced expectantly at the windows of the Overland House as they swept past. But they remained blank. The faces they both wanted to see did not appear.

THEY rode in silence with O'Shane and his saddle guard ahead and to the rear. It was the first time in months Silk had tooled a stagecoach, but he had earned his nickname as a crack "silk-popper" on other lines in other parts of the west. Now he was rolling into the biggest venture of them all—perhaps for the last time.

They made the first fifteen-mile station in an hour flat, and nearly equaled that pace on the next leg. There they lost O'Shane and the escort, whose horses were jaded.

They rolled on alone through wild, primitive land, following the trace of the rough new trail. They scanned every rock and clump of timber that might conceal an ambush, but Silk had a hunch that the real danger would not begin until they were beyond the Laramie Mountains.

He pulled up suddenly. They had left the third relay station ten miles behind, and now two figures moved on foot into the trail ahead. Both were carrying Henry repeating rifles and holstered six-shooters. Silk swore as he made out the faces beneath the rough, felt hats that covered their hair.

Penny Gilroy and Lucinda Morrow, flushed and defiant, scrambled in with Jawbone without awaiting an invitation as Silk pulled the stage to a stop.

"We left Julesburg by saddle horse before daybreak," Penny called, "and waited for you here. You can't leave us here on foot. We turned our horses loose. We've got guns and

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shells. Drive on, Silk. You can't count us out after we've stayed in the game this far."

They turned a deaf ear to Silk's pleas that they get off at the next station. "I can shoot as straight as any man," Penny said hotly. "I've got as much at stake as either of you. And Lucinda has a right to come along if she wishes, after—after all the things that have happened."

Argument would not budge them. Defeated, Silk drove on. He barricaded them back of mail sacks as an added safeguard, and put his faith in luck.

They reeled off the miles. By mid-afternoon the Laramies were behind them and the Medicine Bows were lifting ahead. Tension began to grow in Silk. He believed that if they got through the Medicine Bows they would make it to the finish. But would they get through?

THEN they felt the impact of Mitch Buckman's first blow. It was the Mud Flat Station. As they pulled up, they gazed in silence at the ashes of the station. The stock barn was burned to the ground also, still smouldering. The corrals were empty, and there was no sign of the barn man or station boss.

Silk drove on with a tired team. The next station had also been raided, but the two men on duty there had brought the relay team into their rock-built station at the first sign of trouble, and had forted up, standing off half a dozen men who opened up on them from a nearby ridge.

The stage rolled ahead with the fresh horses in the traces.

"They can't make it much tougher," old Jawbone commented. But he was wrong.

Rifles opened up on them as they entered the afternoon shadows of the Medicine Bows. Two men were firing from the shelter of boulders above the trail.

A bullet smashed the stock of a Henry rifle Leland was holding, and that saved his life. Another slug drilled the brim of Silk's hat. The near swing horse was hit, and then one of the wheelers was killed in mid-stride.

Jawbone, Penny and Lucinda opened up from the coach with Henrys. Silk mastered the panicky team, dragged the coach to a stop, and joined in with his rifle.

Bullets kicked dust along the ridge where the rimrockers were lying. Silk saw one figure rear up convulsively, and then the body rolled down the face of the rocky slant.

The second head also vanished. "I drilled thet other one right through the brisket," old Jawbone yelled. "Had him dead in the notch when I squeezed. You must have got the one thet made that toboggan slide, Silk. The gals was shootin' too low. You got to allow fer more elevation when yo're notchin' on a target uphill, gals."

Silk had to shoot the wounded horse. He cut both the dead animals out of the harness, and the stage lurched ahead again. It was near sundown when they changed to fresh horses at Running Springs relay. Ahead lay Diamondback Canyon.

"You're heading into misery, Silk," the station tender warned. "I spotted riders up on them rims along the canyon this afternoon. They was white men. I used an old brass telescope on 'em, an' one of 'em was about the size an' shape of Mitch Buckman hisself."

SILK had the station tender point out to him exactly where he had sighted those figures. He stood a moment, pondering. The stage was nearly an hour ahead of the schedule he had set, in spite of the trouble they had already encountered. They could afford a considerable delay, and still make up lost time when they hit the easier going across the Red Desert beyond.

This thing had to be fought out. Silk weighed the chances. He had the lives of two men and two girls in addition to his own to balance against the odds Buckman held against him.

He made his decision. He looked at Jawbone. "We'll injun up along the ridges and take a look-see," he said. "Maybe we can locate Buckman's outfit, and pin 'em down long enough for the stage to make a run through. Leland, you drive ahead, slow. Stop under cover before you reach the canyon and wait until you hear from me. Give me and Jawbone time to work our way up toward the rim. If the coast is clear I'll fire my six-shooter three times. Then ram that stage through as fast as hell will let you."

He looked at the girls. "You two are staying here at the station," he said emphatically. "And no arguments."

Silk and Jawbone saddled up two horses back in the brush and rode away, keeping to cover in case they were being watched through field glasses from the ridges.

After they had started to climb, Silk looked back and glimpsed the stage pulling away from the station on the flats. He frowned, and looked helplessly at Jawbone. He could plainly see two figures in the vehicle. Penny and Lucinda had once more disobeyed his order to stay out of danger.

Keeping off the skyline, he and Jawbone worked their way up the mountainside through rough draws and over hogback divides. Their course paralleled the canyon which gashed into the terrain off to their right. They scanned the brush and skyline ahead with unceasing vigilance.

Suddenly they pulled up, listening. Faintly from somewhere came the steady thud of a hammer on metal.

They dismounted. Taking their rifles, and pulling their gun holsters around within quick reach, they silently climbed a rocky gully toward the summit of a low ridge. Silk led the way. Reaching the rim he cautiously lifted his head to take a look beyond.

There, fifty yards away, was a whiskery, rough-clad man with a rifle slung in his arm. He was a lookout who had just climbed to the ridge.

His startled eyes saw Silk. Then he yelled, lifted the rifle and fired. Silk's Henry exploded at the same instant. His face was peppered with stinging fragments as a bullet glanced from a rock within scant inches of his head.

His own slug had torn through the stomach of the whiskery man, knocking him down. The man lay there twisting in his death throes.

THE echoes of the two reports rattled from ridge to ridge. The area ahead was not far from where Silk had fought Pony Track, the Brule. The canyon rim, overlooking the new stage-trail below, lay no more than a hundred yards to the right.

Men had been working along the lip of the canyon with sledgehammers, shovels and drills. Silk saw cans of black powder lying about. Farther along a short fuse showed in plain sight, leading to a freshly tamped charge buried deep in the ground.

Silk recognized Mitch Buckman among the dozen or more startled men who had been placing the powder charges. He glimpsed Blackie Hatch.

Then rifles opened up, and bullets stormed around him. He crouched back of a boulder, pulled Jawbone alongside him.

"They've mined the rim, aiming to block the trail with a landslide, or blast the mountainside down on the stage itself," he gritted. "Fort up, Jawbone. Keep 'em away from that powder charge."

They threw themselves flat, crawled to vantage points and opened up. Buckman's outfit had abandoned the powder charges and had instinctively taken cover as they shot back at the low ridge which overlooked their position.

Silk notched on a man who was changing position, saw him go down. He heard Jawbone yell triumphantly, saw another opponent fall.

But it was evident the odds were six to one or more against them. They had bumped into Buckman's entire crew.

A brief lull came in the roar of gunfire. Silk drew his six-shooter, and fired three times in the air. He wondered if Frank Leland would hear that signal and recognize it.

Mitch Buckman's voice was shouting orders down there. "There's only two of 'em," Buckman was yelling. "Spread out. Rush 'em, wipe 'em out."

The rifles opened up again. A bullet glanced from a boulder, raked a long gash along Silk's ribs. The scene swam before his eyes for a moment. He steadied, fought off the shock of that wound.

From his position he had a view of a short stretch of stage-trail a mile away, just below the canyon mouth. He saw the stagecoach appear on that ribbon of trail, tiny at that distance. The thin streamer of dust that followed it showed that the vehicle was traveling at a gallop.

Leland had understood his signal. "The stage is on its way," he rasped at Jawbone. "Leland ought to be able to go by in less than


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fifteen minutes—if we can hold 'em. Keep 'em busy fighting us. Don't let anybody get near that fuse."

Buckman must have glimpsed that oncoming stage also. He was cursing, yelling orders.

A rush started toward the fuse, which showed white against the barren earth near the canyon rim. Both Silk and Jawbone worked the Henrys with grim desperation. One man fell. Bullets kicked around the others. They suddenly lost their nerve, and went scrambling back to cover of loose boulders.

Then, lashed by Buckman's voice, they came in a rush toward the ridge itself, taking advantage of the boulders which offered cover.

They were closing inexorably in. Silk's rifle went empty, and he began using his six-shooters. Jawbone was now using his belt guns too.

Silk felt the hard impact of a bullet in his leg. His left arm went suddenly numb. Contorted faces of battle-maddened men loomed up close at hand. He shot one between the eyes, knocked another down with an empty gun.

He snatched up the other six-shooter which had dropped from his numbed left hand. He straightened, and saw Mitch Buckman. The man's face was ashine in the glow of sundown. He had a six-shooter in each hand.

Silk fired, saw his slug sift dust from the front of Buckman's shirt. He felt the heat of the double blast from Buckman's guns, and knew he had been hit again.

Mitch Buckman's body plunged forward, plowing up dust. It did not move.

Silk vaguely realized the space around him was clear. He saw Jawbone locked hand-to-hand with a burly man. Silk lifted his six-shooter and fired his last bullet. Both Jawbone and his opponent fell, rolling a dozen yards down the slant.

Jawbone arose alone. The old man got shakily to his knees, peering at his dead opponent.

Three men were racing away, abandoning that bloody attack. Silk saw another survivor skulking away through rocks and brush.

Then Silk glimpsed one figure crouching over the fuse to the powder charge. It was Blackie Hatch, who had hung back from the charge on the ridge.

Silk picked up his empty Henry rifle. It seemed an age before he could get a shell in the chamber. The gun and the shell were wet with his blood, and the scene kept spinning around before him.

In the silence he could hear the pound of hoofs and the rattle of wheels on the stage road in the canyon. Leland was lashing the team ahead in a race to reach the summit.

Silk lifted the rifle, notched on Blackie Hatch, and steadied. He pulled the trigger. The little, ugly gunman twisted around from his crouching position, and fell on his back, jerking quickly.

Silk saw the glow of a block of matches Blackie Hatch had been holding in his hand. He stood there dully watching the fuse. No spurt of fire or smoke showed from the white strand.

Silk heard the wheels of the stagecoach grind nearer, and pass by. The sound continued on up the canyon and began to fade. The first Great Western Mail coach had gone through.

Jawbone had a bullet in his leg. Silk helped him, and they reeled like drunken men to the rim of the canyon. The stagecoach was nearing the summit a quarter of a mile ahead.

Silk saw faces staring back, and he lifted his arms in a signal of victory. The stage halted. Frank Leland and Penny and Lucinda came leaping to the ground.

Silk watched Penny lead the way. She was the first to reach him where he sat on a boulder. She babbled something as she saw him, for he was matted with blood and dust.

"Silk! Oh, my dear, my dear!"

She was kissing him. She was holding him in her arms, crooning in his ear, pleading with him not to die. And she was saying, incredibly, that she loved him.

Silk listened to these things, and it was like hearing wonderful, impossible music. He mumbled, " I don't believe it. I'm not that lucky, Penny."

Then he didn't remember anything for a while. When he aroused again he was aboard the stage, which was rocking along on its thoroughbraces at a steady gait. His head was in Penny's lap. He saw old Jawbone, with a bandaged leg and head.

Jawbone peered at him through the dim glow of the fading twilight. "Luckiest jigger in the world," he snorted. "Hit four times, an' none of 'em more'n scratches. An' with a purty girl to hold his head an' bawl over him. There ain't nobody makin' any fuss over me, is they?

"Frank Leland's up on top tryin' to learn to be a one-handed stage driver. Him an' Lucinda's talkin' about gittin' married if'n they can round up a sky pilot at Fort Bridger. We're damned near down on the Red Desert now, Silk. The shootin's all over. Mitch Buckman won't ever bother nobody any more."

Silk looked up at dark eyes that were tender and happy. "Luck," he said, "is no name for it. It'll be a double wedding, Jawbone. You'll be best man."

He pulled Penny Gilroy's face nearer. And she was willing.

THE END

# HARDROCK RATIONING

## By E. Roderic Fuchs

**Food shortages? The old-timers had them too. . . . Witness the case of booming Virginia City, Montana, where mountain blizzards upped the price of flour to $1.50 a pound—if, as, and when you could get it!**

FOOD shortages and rationing? The Old West, particularly the mining camps, had those troubles too. There were food scares, high prices, and the "supply lines" were often long and dangerous.

Take, for instance, the mining camps of Montana in the middle 60's—Virginia City, Alder Gulch, and Bannack. Their community price schedules would have read something like this:

*When, As, and If Available*

| | |
|---|---|
| Flour | 30c pound |
| Potatoes | 15c pound |
| Sugar | 65c pound |
| Dried Apples | 22c pound |
| Butter | 85c pound |
| Tea | $2.25 pound |
| Soap | 35c pound |

Wild game was, of course, plentiful, and for a winter's supply of meat all that was needed was a gun, dry powder, and a good shooting eye. Apparently there was no shortage of whisky. A fairly good bourbon was available at from $4.00 to $8.00 per gallon.

For all practical purposes these camps were cut off from the outside. There was little, if any, traffic northward over the Rockies to Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri. The Bitterroot Valley to the northwest produced some food, but there was no way of getting it to the camps except by pack animals. The only sure links with the outside world were the freighters and wagon trains from Salt Lake City, over the "hump" and far to the south; but their comings and goings were governed almost entirely by the weather.

In the winter of 1864-65, the camps suffered a flour famine because of fierce mountain storms. When it became known in Virginia City that the freighters could not get through, the town flew into a panic. Miners hoarded flour, merchants profiteered—and the price skyrocketed to $1.50 a pound. Then a few of the merchants tried to corner the supply and refused to sell at any price.

For a few days after that, there was a lot of threatening talk but no action. Finally the miners, hungry and desperate, held a mass meeting and voted to a man to take matters into their own hands. They elected a leader, one H. N. Blake, and, as an emblem of their cause, they appropriately nailed a flour sack to a long pole. Thus equipped, the men began the search for flour.

The representatives of law and order did nothing to interfere with the organization of the "Flour Committee", because the leaders had promised that the owners of confiscated flour would be paid a fair price.

As with most loosely organized mobs, however, this one lost sight of its purpose and degenerated into a looting expedition. The searchers began by taking a merchant's flour and ended by stealing everything on his shelves. Nor did they overlook the saloons.

In great alarm, the merchants banded together and sent for Neil Howie, a deputy sheriff. Howie heard the merchants' story, then he strode out to meet the mob and shouted, "Gentlemen, the way I understand it, this uprising is to get flour at a reasonable price. Let's keep it that way. The first man caught stealing or looting will be shot!"

Since everyone had a healthy respect for Howie and the Vigilantes, the search continued in a more orderly fashion. The town was posted to prevent flour from being smuggled out. At the Taylor-Thompson Store a small riot resulted when the owners armed their employees to prevent seizure of their flour supply; but otherwise there was no violence.

The search lasted the greater part of a day, and all the flour collected was stored in a community hall where a citizens' committee took charge, allowing the owners $36 per hundredweight and each miner a ration of 18 pounds of flour. The hungry miners willingly stood in line for hours, waiting to exchange their sacks of gold dust for precious flour. In short order the committee reduced the ration to ten pounds. Even so, there was not enough flour on hand to go around.

The rationing went on for three days, but it gave only temporary relief. Actually most of the flour in Virginia City was still cached and hoarded away. When the word was noised around that many women and children would starve unless flour was found for them, the hoarded caches were brought out of hiding. By dint of voluntary rationing and sharing, the flour supply was made to last until the spring thaws, when the freighters were again able to come through from Salt Lake.

At any rate, the meat and potato eaters of today may find some comfort in knowing that only the hardiest miners voluntarily restricted themselves to an all-meat diet during the flour famine!

# HOSS GREER'S MURDER MINE

## By Harry F. Olmsted

**A Novel of Old Arizona**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Grubstake to Hell

MANY factors contributed to Hoss Greer's success in the wide-flung cattle ranges of Arizona, none more than his love of trading. It was his boast that he had never been bested in a horse-trade. It followed naturally that he was a sucker for a bargain—and therein lay the source of much of his trouble. Bargains have a way of backfiring, and so they did for Hoss, many times. Yet such was his initiative in making the best of a bad deal, he seldom was forced to post it in red ink. Witness his bargain in the Sierra Gallinas. . . .

It started when Hoss got the letter from a land and mining agent in Alpine City. The man told of the abandonment of the Blue Jay Mine, on the south slope of the Gallinas, by the Territorial Mining Company. The vein had petered out and a large flow of water had been struck in the main tunnel, filling the shafts and pouring out into the dry bed of Blue Jay Creek, thence into arid Jackass Flats, where it was already promoting the growth of grass and browse. These conditions made a previously barren range attractive for some

"I'm payin' you off!" roared Hoss.

**Hoss Greer had made many a swap in his time, but never had he won a cattle range which turned out to be, instead, a million-dollar bonanza. Naturally, Hoss figured there was a catch in it—and his two friends' bodies, sprawled in a grim, warning X in hell's glory-hole—proved he was right!**

enterprising cowman, and the Company holdings could be had for a song. Was Hoss interested?

Hoss was. He forked his Traveler horse, had a look at the proposition on the way to Alpine and closed the deal within two hours after arriving in town. Afterward, mellow with the satisfaction a man feels when he has negotiated a real bargain, he headed for a restaurant in the lingering cool of the upland evening.

Hoss' first hint of the panhandler was the sudden appearance of a feisty little rat-hound fawning about his boots. He looked up. The dog's owner was moving out from a saloon wall, flashing a snaggle-tooth grin.

"Bonanza likes you, mister," he croaked. "An' otherwise I wouldn't make so bold as to brace you. You reckon you could spare a quarter to stake a man to coffee an' cakes?"

Hoss looked him over with suspicion born of long experience with this breed. "Coffee an' cakes?" he echoed, cynically, "or Sunnybrook?"

The panhandler held up his hands protestingly. His shirt was dirty, his coat and pants ragged and weathered. His boots were scuffed and run-over at the heels, and his hat was sweat-stained and shapeless. "Not Sunnybrook, mister," he said. "I reckon I've drank my share an' I like a drink as well as most, but nothin' takes the place of food when a man ain't et for a hull day, an' not well fer a month. I'd be obliged most mortal if—"

"Come on," said Hoss. "You can eat with me."

"Bonanza too, mister?" The derelict looked lovingly at his dog. I've et some since he has, an'—"

"An' Bonanza too," grinned Hoss. "Let's go."

They moved along the walk, the rat-hound bounding ahead of them as if he understood. He barked and leaped against the door of the restaurant and Hoss let him in. The little animal scuttled to a vacant table, jumped onto a chair and sat up, his paws on the board.

It tickled the cowman. He was chuckling as he and the panhandler pulled up chairs. The grin faded as a man at an adjoining table kicked back his chair, dislodged the dog from his place at table, kicked the little beast in the belly as it hit the floor and lifted it a good dozen feet away.

Bonanza uttered not a yelp. He got his feet under him, glared a moment at the man with the clipped mustache, the stock, fancy vest and California foxed pants, and gave one snarling bark. He fairly flung himself at the man, swerved past a swinging boot and fastened his teeth in the leg of his tormentor.

The man vented a string of oaths and drew a nickled gun from the fancy holster under his coat. Hoss, who had come to his feet, whipped out his hogleg and swung, rapping the man smartly across the wrist, knocking the gun from his numbed fingers.

The panhandler dived for his dog, pried him loose from the man's leg and backed away. One of the three who had been eating with the fancy dresser made a stab at his holster, and found himself looking into the yawning muzzle of Hoss' gun.

"Pull it!" rapped the old cowman, by now fully aroused. "It's time somebody taught you gents some manners. Me an' Li'l Sister Suzie here are prime to play schoolmarm. Jerk it an' le's see what's in your smoke!"

"Hold it, Frenchy," snapped the dandy who had kicked Bonanza. And then to old Hoss: "My friend," rubbing his injured wrist and sneering, "that will be the costliest business you ever stuck your bill into. This barfly, Tol'able Tate, has been thrown out of my saloon for panhandling three times in the last week. The citizens of this town are fed up on him, ready to heave him and his ugly-tempered cur out of town. Birds of a feather flock together. You've both got twelve hours to get out of town. If the sun shines on you again in Alpine, you'll pay through the nose. Come on, boys."

The four of them stalked out, scowling murderously, and without paying their bills. The proprietor, a weasel-faced man with a yellow stubble beard and pale blue eyes under bleached brows, came to where Hoss was reseating himself. He was trembling with mixed fear and anger.

"You men will have to get out." He swung his hand toward some signs, two of which related to refusing patronage and a prohibition against dogs. "If you can read, I don't have to explain why. Get out!"

"Tate," snapped Hoss, ignoring the restaurant man, "set the little critter in his chair like he was when he was interrupted." He laid his six-shooter carefully on the table. "An' if this bull cook gone wrong don't fetch us three rare steaks an' all the trimmin's to suit us, I'm shootin' him an' his hog trough to doll-rags. Take a load off your boots, Ol' Timer."

THE frightened proprietor moaned about the embarrassment they were putting him to, but he served the steaks. Then he stood by, sweat streaming down his face, and watched grinning Tol'able Tate cut a steak into fine bits, and Bonanza lap it up and lick the plate. Full-fed and warmed by the excitement of conflict, Hoss paid the bill and dropped the change into the horny hand of the panhandler. Out on the walk, Tate expressed his gratitude.

"You're a white man," he said, strongly moved, "an' me an' Bonanza appreciate what you've done. Some day we'll locate another gold mine an' when we do, we'll cut you in. What's your name an' where can I get in touch with yuh?"

Hoss told him, faintly amused. He was well acquainted with these desert rats who comb the outlands for rich metal—their undimmed dreams and boundless optimisms. He himself had grubstaked many, without ever realizing a dime from his "investments."

He wished Tol'able well, patted the pup on the head and was turning away when the panhandler said, "You crossed a bad man, Greer, when you clouted Blaze Taggart an' throwed down on Frenchy La Voice. The other two was Jake Sheedy an' Faro Tallat. They're all bad, but none as bad as Taggart's prize gunman, 'Pache Mullaney. Look out for him, 'cause Blaze will set him onto you, shore as shootin'."

"Thanks," said Hoss, dryly. "But I wasn't born yesterday, Tate, an' I've spent my life lookin' after myself. If Taggart an' his gun-

nies come askin' for it, they'll find it, bet on that."

He grinned at the sober old prospector and bowlegged down the walk toward the stable, intent upon seeing that his horse was well grained against the ride to Tres Alamos on the morrow. As he turned into the stable, the hostler, half asleep in a deep rawhide chair, lifted a languid hand in salute and idly watched Hoss move back into the stalls, down a corridor faintly lit by the rays from one smoky lantern.

Hoss turned into the stall where Traveler stood, laid his hand on the pony's rump. He felt a quiver of fear run along the animal's nerves, heard its snort of terror. To that extent he was warned. It was not enough. A human form catapulted at him from the manger—a giant form.

Hoss had a fleeting glimpse of a contorted face the color of a fish-belly, of muddy brown eyes flecked with green. A snarl came from a cruelly-gashed mouth filled with snaggy teeth. Hoss threw up his arm to ward off the swinging gun-barrel, felt it crash through his guard and thud against his skull. He knew he was falling and tried desperately to draw his gun. But the wires were down between brain and muscle and his hand would not obey his will.

Again the gun-barrel thudded against his head and a blaze of light obscured his vision. He felt the agony of heavy boots crunching against his face, his chest, his belly and ribs.

THE business of coming alive was as fierce an ordeal as Hoss Greer had ever experienced. Pain engulfed him in recurring waves that drove him back, again and again, into the shadows of oblivion. He heard wild cursing and shouting and it was a long time before he knew it was his own voice. Then another voice struck through—a soft, soothing voice, strangely familiar. Gentle hands bathed his bruised and swollen face with cooling water. He tore his eyes open with a great effort.

He lay under a pine tree, on the soft, resinous needles, with Tol'able Tate bathing his face with water from the creek that chatted close by. Bonanza lay beside him, whining nervously, licking Hoss' hand. Tol'able was saying, "—an' I'm shore glad you're comin' around. Feared for a time you was gonna be as dead as Mullane thought you was when he drug you outa Alpine an' rolled you into a dry gulch. But I follered along; Bonanza discovered where you lay an' I bin nursin' you. You're tough, Greer, an' in a week me an' the pup'll have you good as new. How about a little broth brewed from a blue grouse?"

That broth warmed Hoss and strengthened him. He slept the clock around, woke, took more broth and slept again. And when he woke that third time, he knew he was on the mend.

It was good, lying there in the deep pine forest, hearing the squirrels, jays and wild turkeys voice their calls, listening to the song of the wind through the pines, eating wild meat brought down with Tol'able's small rifle, and resting. But rest brought renewed health and that, in its turn, brought a growing restlessness.

"I had it comin'," he told the prospector. "You warned me an' I brushed the warnin'

off an' walked right smack-dab into it. That's all right too. I take what I order an' I pay my bills, prompt." His fingers explored his empty holster and his lips, slowly losing their swelling, pursed ruefully. "The question now is, what am I gonna use to pay with."

"Time enough for that, Greer, when you're healed up an' fit to tackle a chore that big." The inflection Tol'able used betrayed clearer than any words how hopeless he deemed so unequal a challenge. Old Hoss snorted.

"Nonsense! Aside from two black eyes an' a few skinned places I'm as good as ever. I gotta get hold of a gun an' finish what's to do around here, so's I can ride home an' arrange to put a man on my new holdings on Blue Jay Crick."

Tol'able Tate started. "Blue Jay? I found a mine down there, sold it to the Territorial Mining Company. Yep, the Blue Jay Mine. If only I coulda worked it, I'd be sittin' on top of the world. But . . . "

"You'd be busted," said Hoss. "They hit water an' lost the lead. I bought the whole shebang—buildings, diggin's, an' land—for a song."

"You bought the Blue Jay? Fer how much, if it's a fair question?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand!" Tol'able grimaced. "An' I sold it fer five hundred."

"An' drank it up, eh Tate?"

THE prospector looked startled. "No, Mister Greer. Never even ate on it. You see, I got a daughter back East. She's bein' raised quality, in a high-toned gal's boardin' school. Ain't seen her in years. She thinks I'm a minin' man an' I've most busted a gallus keepin' her supplied with enough mazuma. Otherwise I'd never have sold the Blue Jay for no such figger. She needs money now an' I'm damned if I know where it's comin' from."

"How much she need?" Hoss felt ashamed of his twitting.

"Hundred dollars would see her through—fer a time."

"Tell you what I'll do, Tate. I'll give you the hundred an' set up a joint account at Alpine so's you can keep yourself in grub an' tobacco an' horse feed. You come down an' look after a jag of yaks I'll range up yonder an' mebbe do a little prospectin' on the side. How's it strike you?"

"Strike me? Hell, Greer, it floors me. You make me want to bawl, savin' my life thisaway. When can I start?"

"First I'll have to get down to the bank, establish an account, buy a gun an' make Taggart an' his gunnies scarce."

"Goodbye hundred," mourned the prospector.

"You'll get that in advance," grinned Hoss, "an' do your worryin' down at the Blue Jay."

"Lost the vein, eh?" Tol'able pulled his chin, reflectively, his eyes burning with a strange light. "That's my dish, Greer. I'll find it again, shore as my name's Tate, an' we'll both be rich."

"Take care of my cattle for a year," said Hoss, stirred by ancient memories of past mining excitements, "an' I'll make you a present of the mine an' all that's in it."

They talked for hours, pleasantly planning each what he hoped to accomplish in the canyon above Jackass Flats. So the hours passed and they slept on it. A few days later they walked down into Alpine, old Hoss still showing the scars of the cruel beating he had taken. Here, after determining that his horse was still in its stall and all right, he went to the bank and took steps to have money transferred from Phoenix.

With the joint account established and money in his jeans, Hoss bought a six-shooter at the hardware store, bade Tol'able wait for him, and went barging into the Pine Pillars Saloon—Blaze Taggart's place.

Taggart was not there, and the bartender didn't know where he was nor when he would return. And the same went for his four strong-arm men—Tallat, Sheedy, Mullane and La Voice. With a strong feeling of being cheated, Hoss took his leave of Tol'able Tate and Bonanza, mounted Traveler and rode for home.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Bushwhack Bonanza

ONCE more in command of his many business interests, Hoss was held in bonds of care and responsibility. He sent two cowpunchers to Blue Jay Canyon with fifty head of poor cows from his Queen Creek Ranch, and proceeded to forget the matter. He had no occasion to remember Tol'able Tate until three months later when he received a notice from the bank at Alpine that the joint account was overdrawn. Would he take care of the matter at his earliest convenience?

Hoss' ordinary routine would have been to send a check and go on about his business. Two things militated against such a procedure in this case. First, he considered three months too short a time for Tol'able to have used up five hundred dollars. Second, the stress of business worries had told heavily upon him; he craved a breather in the pine parks of the high mesa country. Not even he would have admitted that a desire to even his score with Taggart impelled his departure.

Hoss rode first to the Blue Jay Mine. He found his cattle grazing on Jackass Flats, carrying a new weight of fat over their ribs.

That was good. What he found at the mine was less of a satisfaction. There was evidence that Tol'able had lived in one of the shacks, but he was missing and from the signs he hadn't been there for some time.

Ugly suspicions were taking form in Hoss' brain. It began to look as if he had guessed wrong about Tol'able. For the most part, his first impressions of men were best, but from here it seemed that Tate was a panhandler, first, last and all the time. Nothing rankled in Hoss more than betrayal by one he had trusted; he was seething with hurt and indignation as he rode toward Alpine to take care of the overdraft.

He climbed up out of precipitous Blue Jay Canyon, hit the mesa top and had loped five miles along the road through the timber when a flash of movement up ahead caught his attention. It was a span of ponies hauling a buckboard. Spotting Hoss, the driver reined in, set the brake and waited his approach. He was a lank-jawed man with tobacco-stains at the corners of his mouth.

"Hey," he shouted. "Am I goin' right fer the Blue Jay Mine?"

Hoss reined down. "This is the road," he said, "only it'll never take you to the mine. Bad washout on the switchbacks leadin' down to the mine. Little matter of a two-mile walk." Hoss looked at the pretty girl on the seat beside the driver. "What was you figgerin' on at the mine?"

The driver spat. "Miss Tate here got off the train at Winslow an' hired me to fetch her up here to her dad, owner of the Blue Jay an' a big man in minin' circles. You know him?"

Hoss grimaced, feeling the double impact of Tol'able's defection. "I know him better'n most," he said, soberly. "He's not at the mine."

"Oh, dear," gasped the girl. "I'm Teresa, his daughter. He wrote that he'd struck it rich in the Blue Jay and that he'd soon be able to have me out for a visit. I thought I'd surprise him, so I came on. Where—where is he?"

"Tate," lied Hoss, "is in New Mexico, looking after another of his many mining interests. I'm expecting to meet him in Alpine tomorrow. Your best bet will be to go there and put up at the Mountain House. He sure will be surprised."

HOSS watched the driver turn the buckboard around, and he rode beside it all the way to Alpine, talking with Tol'able's tenderfoot daughter. It was plain from her first word that the old prospector was her idol, everything a father should be. She told of Tol'able's bitter struggle to wring riches out of the ground, how he had sacrificed to keep her in school and how, now that she had finished her education, she hoped to repay him by helping run his business. She didn't know what other mines her father owned in Arizona and New Mexico, but they were many.

"I don't know," said Hoss, grumpily, "an' I wouldn't talk about it if I did. First lesson you'll have to learn, young lady, is not to talk about your dad's business. Especially when you reach Alpine. You don't know who you're talkin' to or what you've dropped that may help ruin your dad."

"Thanks," she said, meekly, and thereafter remained silent, seeming to know she had been rebuked.

When they came into Alpine and the liveryman had been paid and departed on the long trip back to Winslow, Hoss took the girl to the Mountain House. He saw her comfortably settled and took leave of her, heading for the bank and silently damning a man who would so mislead a pretty, intelligent daughter.

The hour was getting late and the bank was long closed. But the staff was at work and Hoss' persistent knocking gained him admittance.

"Yes, yes, Mister Greer," gushed the banker. "I'm glad to see you. Hated to inconvenience you with this petty matter, but with Mister Tate in the hospital and totally without funds—"

"In the hospital?" Hoss felt a twinge of shame at previously condemning Tol'able. "What's wrong with him?"

"He was assaulted on the street, one night about a week ago, Mister Greer, dragged into an empty store building and severely beaten. He has a cracked skull and—"

"Taggart," muttered Hoss.

"How's that?" asked the banker.

"Nothing," said Hoss.

"Yes," went on the bank president, "Tate drew out all but a few dollars of the joint account about six weeks ago and disappeared. He returned only ten day or so ago. He needed more than there was in the account to be admitted to the hospital, so I advanced it and notified you."

"Thanks," grunted Hoss, and signed the paper adding five hundred more to the account. "I'll go over and see Tate right away."

As he walked toward the private hospital, run by an Alpine doctor, he summed up the debt owed him by Blaze Taggart, gambler, saloonman and employer of man-breaking plug-uglies.

THE hospital smelled pungently of medicines, and the nurse spoke in whispers as she led Hoss to the room where Tol'able lay. The old fellow looked fine. He was washed and barbered and his eyes were bright and

clear. He flashed his snaggle-tooth grin at sight of Hoss, and behind it was a hint of high excitement.

"You're the kind of a pardner a man likes to have," he said, giving Hoss' hand a fervent clasp. "Busy as you are, I didn't know if you'd be able to get away as soon as this, but I knowed if you could bust loose, the news I sent you would turn the trick."

"News?" echoed Hoss. "What news, Tol'able?"

"The telegram I sent you."

"Didn't get any telegram. All I got was a notice from the bank that we were overdrawn."

Tol'able looked blank, then a frown creased his forehead. "You reckon that ratty telegraph dispatcher would sidetrack that wire, Greer? I sent you word that I'd struck it rich in the Blue Jay. An' I mean rich. Cripes, we're sittin' on top the cock-eyed world."

"What you mean?" asked Hoss, bored at the necessity of listening to more pipe-dreams of a confirmed desert rat.

The prospector's eyes burned. "The vein that the Territorial Company lost had faulted, just like I thought. I went into the upper tunnel an' found their shots still in the heading, unexploded. I set 'em off an' there the stuff was, soft an' yeller an' purty as a little brick schoolhouse. That's just how close they came to havin' a mine instead of writin' off a loss. You an' me—we're rich!"

"The mine is yours," said Hoss, grouchily, "an' I hope you're right about it bein' something you can cash in on. 'Cause your gal is here in Alpine, thinkin' her dad is a rich mining man. An' then there's the matter of the overdraft. What did you do with the money?"

Tol'able looked ashamed. "I—er—well, to tell the truth, Mister Green, my gal needed money an' I drawed it out of our account, hopin' to pan out some gold down yonder an' replace it. But, pshaw—" he made a brushing motion with his hand, "that's chicken feed. I'll put it back now with a thousand for every dollar I taken. You say my Teresa's in Alpine? Where?"

"At the Mountain House. Waitin' for you to return from a trip to New Mexico that I invented. She can't be stood off long, Tate. Sooner or later she'll find out that you've lied to her, an' she can't live on your hopes for the Blue Jay. How about it?"

Tol'able frowned studiously, then brightened. "I'll be up from here directly, Greer, an' if you could keep her at the hotel till I can get a wagon down to the Blue Jay everything will be fine. That headin' is a glory hole—quick money. It may not last, likely won't, but a few tons of it'll make us well off. Now—"

Hoss' eyes flicked to the half-open window, locked with those of the man lurking there—the man who had heard Tol'able tell the secret of his good fortune. Hoss saw the gun level at the aperture. Concussion rocked the walls of the room. The window-pane came tumbling down in shards and the lamp, lead-shattered, winked out, leaving the sick room in the grip of stygian darkness.

FROM the hall a swift rush of men and unseen hands clutched at Hoss, pulling him to the floor, pummeling him.

Surging up, Hoss lashed back blindly, reacting pleasantly to the shock of battle. For a few seconds he was the hub of a seething fight, then a slashing gun-barrel knocked him to his knees. He drew and the flash of his gun painted a crimson slash across the blackness. A man screamed a curse. Boots trampled Hoss and he heard the crisp order.

"Make sure of them both, this time, then pick up the frill."

That could have been the voice of Blaze Taggart; Hoss was too groggy to tell. And the next he knew the turmoil was done and he was on his hands and knees, shaking his head dazedly as a light and footsteps approached.

"What has happened here?"

It was the doctor, with a pair of frightened nurses behind him. Hoss couldn't tell him much; he didn't know much. The light showed the bed empty, the window and lamp smashed, two bullet-holes in the walls and Bonanza whining and snarling.

The doctor sterilized and took nine stitches in Hoss' split scalp. And, when Hoss had paid Tol'able's bill and the cost of a new window-pane, he agreed not to call in the town marshal.

With Bonanza under his arm, Hoss weaved to a saloon and had a stiff drink. It put legs under him. He hurried to the Mountain House, filled with fears for Teresa Tate. And his fears were justified. The girl was not in her room, nor were there any evidences of a struggle. The renegades had walked in on her, Hoss decided, stuck a gun in her side and ordered her down the back stairs.

Hoss was stumped. That this was Taggart's work, he had not the slightest doubt. And he was equally sure that it concerned Tol'able's strike at the Blue Jay. As he saw it, Taggart would have no earthly use in taking Tol'able except to kill him and to quiet any possible claim to the mine. That might also explain their abduction of Teresa Tate, who must have talked in spite of Hoss' warning.

Hoss, in spite of his burning desire to close with Taggart and have it out, knew better than to hunt the gambler in Alpine. The Blue

Jay Mine would prove a better bet, he thought. Yet, on the chance that they hadn't finished him in the hospital room, Hoss felt certain that 'Pache Mullane or maybe one of Taggart's other gunslingers would be laying for him. He was alert and ready when he left the hotel and moved hurriedly along the walk toward the telegraph office. But nothing happened, and Hoss turned into a door to face a squirrel-jawed, shifty-eyed telegraph operator.

"Pretty nice," Hoss said, letting the ice of his colorless eyes touch the man, "holdin' down two jobs at the same time, when some men can't even get one."

"What you mean?" demanded the operator, with the quick spleen of the weakling with guilt on his conscience.

"Looks like," said Hoss, ignoring the query, "Taggart would pay you enough so you wouldn't have to punch a telegraph key."

The operator's face turned livid. "If you've got business here," he said, icily, "be pleased to state it. I've got work to do."

"Best work you can do, you pint-size crook, is to tuck your legs under you an' raise a tall dust puttin' miles between you an' Alpine City. When you held up that wire from Tate to Greer, about a rich gold strike, an' handed same to Blaze Taggart for a price, you sowed yourself a crop of grief. When I finish with Taggart, I'm coming here an' take up your case—unless you care to come clean an' tell what you know about Taggart's sidelines."

"You go to hell," snapped the telegraph operator, leveling his finger melodramatically. "Get out, or I'll call the marshal."

"Sure." Hoss grinned, struggling to muzzle the enraged dog under his arm. "I'll get out an', if you know what's good for you, you will too. If you're here when I come back, you'll wish you'd never heard of a marshal. Good travelin', son."

HOSS went outside, where a voice hailed him. "Hello, Hoss! What you doin', wranglin' pups instead o' calves? Too bad, too, 'cause I says when I seen you, says I—there's the feller I'm lookin' fer. If anybody's got a job fer a driftin' cowpoke, it's old Hoss Greer."

Hoss turned to shake hands with Jim Torrens, an unsteady cowpuncher who had worked for him on and off for a number of years. "Hello, Jim," he said, not too well pleased. "Lookin' for a job, eh?"

"Shore has had me puzzled, Hoss, where my last summer's wages has gone."

"You know an' I know they went—over polished bars for rotgut whisky, Jim. If you'll promise me to stay put an' look after some cattle I've got on Jackass Flats, I'll put you on now."

Jim Torrens promised. Promises were the easiest things he could make, and easier broken. He quizzed Hoss about the layout, the pay and the way to get there. "I'll go yuh if I lose, Hoss," he said gaily. "An' I promise I'll not let yuh down this time. Don't even send me my pay; I don't want any excuse for comin' into town." He shook Hoss' hand and bowlegged away, eager to be off to his new post.

Hoss moved off down the street, still striving to restrain Bonanza from breaking away and going back into the telegraph office to tackle the operator. He was trying to quiet the angry little beast when gunfire slashed from a black slot between buildings. In the flash, Hoss had a glimpse of a gaunt face vanishing in the shadow even as the bullet clipped his swaying shoulder. Bonanza's struggles handcuffed Hoss, delayed his draw until it was too late.

Doorways were slamming and men were coming on the run. The marshal lumbered up—a fat, arrogant man with a leveled gun in his hand and a deep scowl on his face. "What goes on here?" he demanded. "What's the idea of blastin' shots on the street in defiance of the law?"

Hoss grinned mirthlessly. "Better ask the feller that shot at me from between yonder

buildings, Marshal. Lucky for me he missed. Lucky for him this dog kept me from ventilating him. My gun's six full; wanta smell it?"

Sensing a threat in the query, the lawman shook his head, inquired of the gathering crowd if anyone had witnessed the shooting. Nobody had. He eyed Hoss then with sour intentness. "I've a notion to lock you up on suspicion," he said.

Hoss laughed, tartly. "You might try, Marshal. You'd have better luck, I'm thinking, if Taggart was here with the rest of his bushwhackin' buzzards. But bein' as he's left you on yore own, so to speak, you better take another look at your cards an' pass."

THE lawman, having looked into Hoss' eyes and read that indefinable something that makes men's fingers curl for the gun-snatch, shrugged and turned away. "Your kind ain't welcome in this town, feller," he growled across his shoulder. "Don't let the sun shine on you here or me an' you will shore tangle."

"It'll shine on me," answered Hoss, "an' you're already tangled. If Taggart ain't back by tomorrow noon, he ain't comin' back. Let's see how big you talk then."

The marshal stalked angrily away and the crowd began to disperse, discussing the shots and the quarrel. Hoss stood quietly, his back against a building front, his keen eyes flicking into the pools of shadow along the street. He was still there, Bonanza nestling quietly in the crook of his arm, when a lone rider came loping out of the stable entrance, reined left into the street and spurred swiftly toward the west. The little dog gave a quick bark at sight of him, broke from Hoss' grasp and tore after the horseman, its wild yelps waking sudden echoes in the quiet town.

With the rider hunched and the light so uncertain, Hoss had little chance to identify the man. But he had always been a firm believer in the sagacity of dogs and he knew that rider was the one left behind to destroy him. Having failed, giving way to panic, the man could be going nowhere else than to join Taggart. Hoss broke into a hard run, heading for the stable and his horse.

By the time he hit the street on his horse, the dog's barking had faded out in the distance. Riding the spurs, Hoss raced from town and westward, his ears straining for the faint far yelping of Bonanza. Presently he heard it, and followed just fast enough to keep up with the sound that veered from the road. After some difficulty, Hoss found the trail branching off into high country, threading heavy timber.

For hours Hoss followed Bonanza's wild clamor. Not for a minute did the little beast desist, until the sharp echoes of two shots came drifting back. Fear for Bonanza touched Hoss, and deep respect. But even if the little dog had died up ahead, it had pointed the way. This trail was leading into the road stretching from Alpine City to Blue Jay Canyon.

About an hour after Bonanza's barking was silenced, Hoss hit the mine road and speeded his pace. It was five miles to Blue Jay, and he had covered three of them when the faint whisper of a gunshot came back to him. Hoss rode warily now, his gun ready to his hand. He covered another mile, listening for sounds that didn't come. Then, a little way farther on, he heard something that caused him to rein in. Far off to his right lifted the mournful wailing of Bonanza. Hoss struck out through the scrubby underbrush, leading Traveler.

Hoss found the little animal sitting on its haunches, its tiny muzzle upflung, howling plaintively. Hoss spoke its name and walked toward it. The dog seemed not to notice him for a minute, then it came to him, licked the hand outstretched to pat its head and leaped a rod to the west before pausing. It came back and repeated the dash. Hoss followed. The dog led him up onto the dump from some prospector's mine shaft, went to howling again.

A chill went along Hoss' nerves. "What you got down there, Li'l Feller?" he asked, and thought he knew the answer. Despite his certainty, he was ill prepared for what he saw when he knelt at the edge of the shaft, struck a match and looked down.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Death Hits the Blue Jay

HOSS GREER had looked on death unmoved, many a time, but he was shocked as the tiny beam of light gave him a picture of what lay at the bottom of that fifteen-foot shaft. Jim Torrens lay shapeless and crumpled there, his pallid face upturned to show glassy, sightless eyes staring at the cold stars. Blood still oozed from the hole in his forehead, made by the bullet that had been driven into the base of his skull. He had died instantly.

Below Torrens, face down, lay another body, and Hoss knew it for that of old Tol'able Tate. The match burned Hoss' fingers and he let it drop. "The dirty butchers," he muttered. "The bloody devils." And his blood ran hot with the lust to retaliate.

A low moan answered the sound of his voice. Hoss started. "Hello, down there, Tol'able," he called. "That you?"

"Greer!" came the muffled voice of the prospector. "Knowed you'd come. Them scaly snakes shot me an' dumped me into this hole. But I'm tough. Fooled 'em. The slug musta glanced offa my hard head—"

"Can you move, Tol'able?"

"Can if I can roll this dead man offa me. Till I heard yore voice, I figgered it was you layin' on top of me. There—now I'm free of him. If you could pass down a rope or somethin'—"

Hoss was already at his saddle, unbuckling his lass-rope. He sent the coil hurtling down, directed Tol'able in the business of passing it around his body, stepped into the saddle, took his winds and pulled the old fellow up.

Tol'able was pretty well done up, but save for a nasty scalp wound above one ear, he seemed unharmed. Hoss got him into the saddle and led the horse to the small creek, less than a quarter-mile away. Here he washed the blood off the prospector and satisfied his craving for water. When Tol'able grew talkative, Hoss knew he was all right.

"The dirty buzzards," he said. "They got my gal out of the hotel an' rode us both within a mile of the mine. Then that devil, 'Pache Mullane, led me off the trail an' told me he was lettin' me go if I'd dust outa these hills. I agreed. I'd have agreed to anything to get outa their hands. He rode alongside me, makin' out like he was loosenin' the ropes around my wrists. Then, without warnin', he shot me in the head. My lights went out."

"What about the feller layin' on top of you in the hole, Tol'able?"

"Dunno. He was there when I come to. I knowed he was dead an', like I said, I thought it was you. Sorta lost heart, I did, an' bawled, Greer, mostly because I couldn't see no way to help my pore li'l gal. It's hell to think of her in the hands of them varmints. You think they'll—"

"I aim to see that they don't," said Hoss, frigidly. "Come on. I'll ride you down onto the flat an' you can rest there till I get through dickerin' with Taggart. If I happen to run into more'n I figger, you lay low an' bide your time. Gotta be somebody to serve that outfit its needin's."

"There's five of 'em," growled Tol'able, holding his painful head. "Better if we went to Saint John an' got the sheriff."

"We may have to," agreed Hoss, "but first I want a look-see. Mebbe I can cut that purty gal of yours loose. You wouldn't feel so good with a sheriff's posse shootin' at the cabin an' her in it, would yuh?"

Tol'able said nothing more, letting Hoss help him rise and get into the saddle and clinging to the horn as Hoss led the animal to the canyon rim and down a rocky slide to the bottom. Here the going was easier and after a half-hour, following the bank of the dry stream bed, they came to a widening of the canyon, where the walls drew apart and the gulch debouched into a flat, sandy bowl hemmed by high hills.

HERE the air was heavy with the sweet aroma of water and the plant life which follows it. A scant quarter-mile away, a lone light shone against the flat black back-drop of the hill. There lay the Blue Jay Mine, which Hoss had already visited twice, coming in from below. Hoss stopped the horse and helped Tol'able to alight. The old fellow lay down at once, clinging to the dog, Bonanza.

"Oh-h-h," he moaned. "I feel a hundred year' old. I'd give a dollar fer a drink; ten dollars."

"What you need is rest," gruffed Hoss. "An' to give up worryin'. Mebbe Taggart an' his friends figger like me—that man is born to fight. If so, this orta be a interestin' party. Hang an' rattle, Tol'able. If they prove too tough fer me, you hop my bronc an' ride for help. See you in a few shakes."

Leaving his pony tied beside the reclining prospector, Hoss bowlegged leisurely toward the light, tossing a glance at the Big Dipper and mentally calculating the hour. Something after three o'clock, he decided, maybe close to four.

The mine shacks loomed before him, ranged in a ragged line along the hill toe. He could hear the pawing and snorting of picketed ponies, the gush of water from the mine shaft—and, when he was within two rods of the lighted shack, the clink of glassware, slap of cards, the coarse laugh of a drunken man.

"Looks to me, Blaze, like it's only fair to cut fer the gal. She ain't nothin' that can be divvied, so—"

"No!" That was Taggart, his voice pinched and hard. "The matter's settled—or is it?"

There was an invitation to revolt in his tone, and a man cursed bitterly. "So it goes, Taggart allus gettin' the best of it. He's weak fer the gal or he'd risk her. I'm votin' to kill her. She'll only be poison to us."

"Who's running this outfit, Jake? You or me? You fools don't know how to look ahead. I want this girl as a shield for us if we're bothered before we work out this glory hole—"

"Hogwash," rapped someone. "Don't nobody know we're here. Tate's dead an' so is that cowboy, an' he admitted Greer wasn't expected here for months. Who's gonna bother us?"

"You'd be surprised," said old Hoss, jerking the latchstring and walking in on them. "A man never knows who's liable to drop in on him from nowhere." His forced grin faded and he looked at the staring quintet around the table with eyes cold, hard, totally devoid of mercy. His voice held a brassiness, like the chill that follows fever. "Which one of you shot Jim Torrens, my cowpuncher?"

Silence held and the five continued to stare, fascinated by the nerve of this crazy old-timer

who stood before them, paring his nails with a small pocket-knife. The only movement in the room was from the pale girl who sat on a blanket in one corner of the room. Though her eyes were drenched with fear, she was still full of courage as she motioned Hoss desperately to beat a retreat while he could. The cowman smiled at her and gave his full attention to Taggart.

"Nobody willing to take the blame, eh?" he said. "You needn't be scairt of legal complications. I made a habit of heel-trompin' my own snakes."

Taggart lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew out a thin coil of smoke. "Greer, you seem to think you're a panther cat, a grizzly and a lobo wolf all rolled into one hide. If gall was snakes, you'd assay seventeen rattles and a button."

Hoss looked at him, his rage running up the scale. "You five maggots remind me of a lot of things better forgotten. Like all crooks, you base yore deals on power. But crooks only last till their numbers is up, then they cash their chips." His eyes bored into Taggart's. "It's a shame for one so handsome to die so young. An' on such a nice night, too."

TAGGART smiled a sick smile. Then 'Pache Mullane rose, and Hoss knew where the real power of this outfit lay hidden. 'Pache's face was the color of a fish-belly, his eyes muddy brown flecked with green. His mouth was a cruel, lipless gash out of which peered snaggy teeth. His skin was sere and wrinkled as a last year's beef hide. His hair was long, black and stringy, caught in a knot behind with a raveling of dirty cloth. A wisp of a mustache struggled for existence on his short upper lip.

This killer wore two guns, and death was in his eyes as he growled, "You bin purty lucky, ol' man. But your luck ran out when you come bustin' in here. We couldn't have asked fer nothin' better."

"Good. Then we're all happy." Hoss took time to study the others. Jake Sheedy, gaunt and sinister. Faro Tallat, short and rotund. Weasely Frenchy LaVoice. Four frozen-faced gunpunchers who drew fighting pay and had to earn it. And Blaze Taggart who paid them—suave, handsome, with an air about him of a startled bird poised for flight. Holster-hoppers all, and not one had any reason for wanting Hoss to live. In fact, murder-lights were already kindling in 'Pache's eyes and his hand was moving stealthily toward his right-hand gun.

That obvious intent set fires raging to Hoss' blood. The muscles of his lean jaws bunched into steel knots. He loved these Arizona uplands, the people and the life. But what good was existence with human weasels rampaging on the loose, leaving their bloody sign on these peaceful mesas? In Hoss' veins was the wild call to avenge Jim Torrens whom he had unwittingly sent to his death, to prove to Teresa Tate that her experience was something not to be tolerated by decent men.

He ran his blade across his fingernail, dropped the paring. Then, like in the mumble-the-peg of his youth, he flipped the knife off a finger and, straight as an arrow, through 'Pache's vest and into his chest. The breed bawled like a steer, snatched the knife out and hurled it at Hoss, who ducked, drew and shot, all in one vast explosive effort.

The blade missed, buzzing past Hoss' head and out the open door, missing by fractions. The five renegades were on their feet now and their guns were coming out. Teresa screamed and found her feet. "Get down!" Hoss bawled. "Hug the floor!" She obeyed, much to the cowman's satisfaction.

'Pache was trying to shoot, but he was done. His great reservoir of strength held him erect for a clock-tick, but even that failed. He wilted, toppling sidewise and crashing like a heeled steer. Frenchy LaVoice caught up the pistol lying beside his cards, whirled and spun into the corner where Teresa lay. He tried to catch her up, to use her as a shield, but she fought him off. Frenchy leaped then, caught one of the log tie-beams and drew himself over it. He shot from there and Hoss, struck cruelly in the left shoulder, was knocked flat.

Hoss was down, but a long way from out. Keen and swift as the snap of a quirt, he swung his piece and let go. A bead of blood formed on the ghastly lips of a hole in Frenchy's throat. His head rolled loosely. He teetered there a moment, perfectly balanced. Then he slipped over, head-first, plopping against the floor like a sack of beef guts.

A belching thunder of guns answered Hoss' second coup, and a quick cascade of bullets splattered the earthen floor about him. But the Greer luck held and no slug found a vital place.

He shot again and knocked Faro Tallat off balance as he was aiming for a finishing shot. Jake Sheedy, having paused a fractional second to down his poured drink, dived for a scattergun leaning against the wall, whirled and brought the weapon to bear upon Hoss.

THE cowman, beginning to feel the impact of bullet-shock, made himself forget Tallat and Taggart, came to life like a scalded cat and rolled toward Sheedy. The scattergun swung down and Hoss saw twin bores, big as two cannons. Sweat broke from him as he pivoted around and flattened. A rain of pellets screamed over him and the light danced

precariously on its wick. Then Hoss' pistol was jerking in his hand and Sheedy was falling, a terrible grin on his brutal face.

Hoss' pistol was empty, and it was his salvation that the same was true of his two foes still on their feet. "The skids of hell are greased, you black sons of sooty skillets," he raged, stuffing shells into his weapon. "An' the devil takes the slowest on the reload."

"Then here's yore ticket, Greer," shouted Tallat. He was first with some to spare, thanks to the painful throbbing and weakness of Hoss' left arm. "Burn, damn yuh, burn!" Tallat's gun was speaking now, the stacatto drumming of a fanned .45. It was fast shooting and soon over, but inaccurate. His bullets missed, save for one that horneted Hoss' left side harmlessly. And Hoss was in action, thumbing two shots that put Tallat down for the long count.

All through this, Hoss had heard nothing from the dapper leader, Blaze Taggart. And now he knew why. Blaze was flashing toward the door in a blind panic, his short gun weaving before him. He was scared, as he had never been scared before. His face was white and his knees threatened to let him down. His whole will was to escape, but desperation made him hurl a parting shot at Hoss. Hoss was quicker. His bullet found Taggart's gun-wrist, spinning him around. Screaming, flopping like a winged crow, Taggart backed through the doorway. He raged a parting curse at Hoss, the words choking in his throat as a shadowy figure hurtled at him out of the blackness, lifted the knife Mullane had hurled outside and buried it to the hilt in Taggart's back.

It was over. Hoss weaved dizzily to his feet. Gunsmoke hung like a soiled and tattered curtain in the poorly lit room. From outside came an exploratory voice. "Teresa! Teresa, honey, are you—"

"Daddy!" The girl came up, flashing out the door. Hoss saw father and daughter fly into one another's arms.

He looked up, saw that a strange grayness was crawling over the eastern mountain wall. Day was breaking. Teresa stood looking down at her father, who knelt beside Blaze Taggart.

"Did—did I kill him?" he quavered. "Up till now I never killed a man in my life. I—"

Hoss knelt. "Deader'n hell with the fires out," he said.

Tol'able was apologetic. "I—I guess God won't hold it agin' me. He took my gal an' when I picked up the knife, I stabbed him."

Hoss rose, yawning. "Young lady," he said, half-humorously, "le's see if we can't find something for you to stir up for breakfast. I'm so hungry my briskit's rubbin' galls on my backbone. An' when we've et, we'll take out for Alpine City. There's some gents up there that smell bad of skunk oil. When we clean that up, Tol'able, you can come back here an' pervide for yore daughter's future."

But Tol'able wasn't hearing him. He had the little dog cuddled in his arms. "Bonanza, ol' trapper," he was murmuring, and tears were coursing down his sere cheeks. "You've earned yourself a good thick steak an' picked yourself up a new crop o' fleas."

Old Hoss smiled as he stuffed shells into his pistol. Life was hard at times, but its calmer moments were sweet. The dawn air seemed cleaner, and he was content.

THE END


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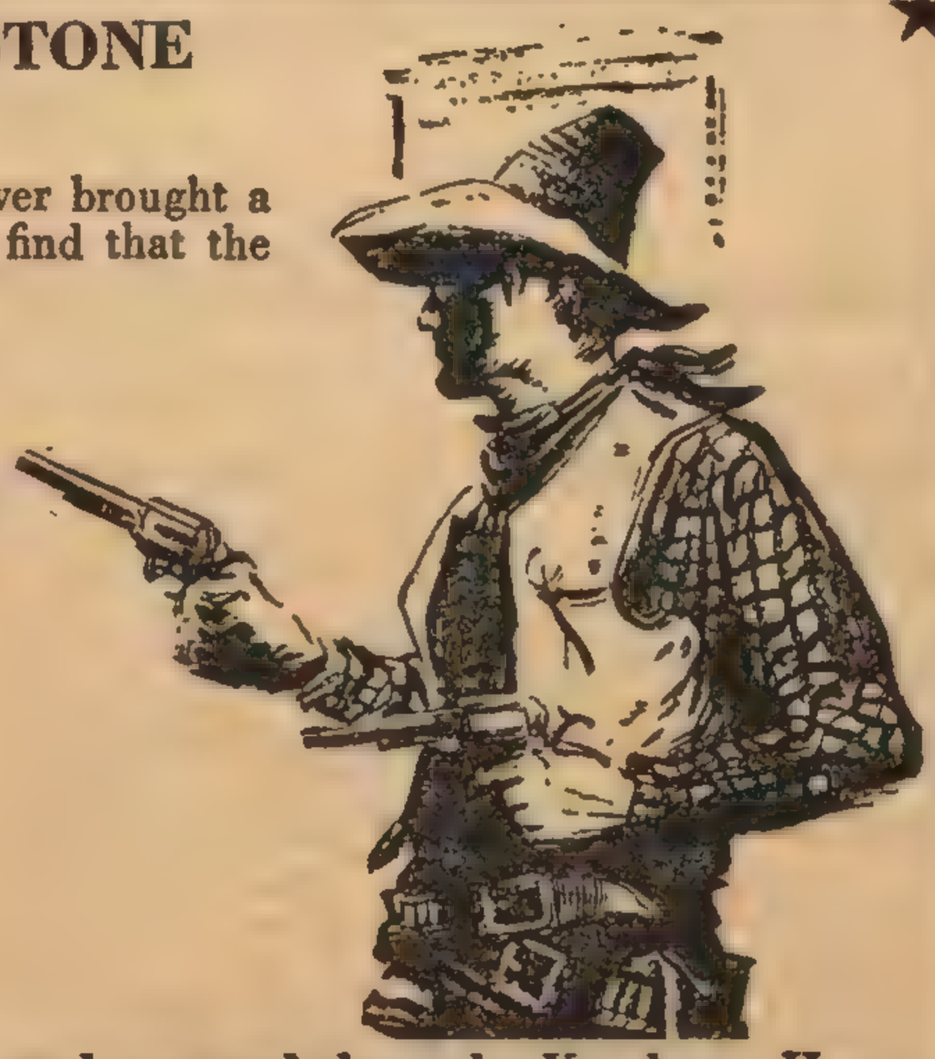

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# The ★ ★

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**Novel of Hard-Fighting Montana Cowmen**

**The new sheriff's star on Jeff Kincaid's chest was a symbol of the hope and trust of hard-pressed ranchers on both sides of the Musselshell Crossing. But Lon Lomax, bounty-hunting renegade, boasted, "A tin star don't make a man bullet-proof. . . . I'll take over the Moccasin Track, and no lawdog kin stop me!"**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Rendezvous With Death

DEACON MELGREN was a Wyoming nester who was behind a lot of the cattle rustling that had the big cattlemen chawing their bits and swearing blue murder—Deacon Melgren and his four lanky sons, each of the sons with his own little greasy-sack outfit and brand and dragging a long rope.

Lon Lomax, who carved a notch on his wooden-handled six-shooter every time he killed a man, claimed he was hired by the Wyoming Stockmen's Association to wipe out

# Moccasin Track Invasion

Deacon Melgren preached his last sermon over that bushwhack grave. . . .

such rustlers as Deacon Melgren. Lomax had fetched half a dozen hand-picked tough gunslingers with him to Wyoming, and nobody asked him any questions.

Deacon Melgren and Lon Lomax met one moonlight night on the bank of Powder River —met without firing a shot. Met, moreover, as two men whose trails had crossed before.

"Long time no see you, Lomax!" Melgren was a tall, rawboned man, six feet six inches without his high-heeled boots. He was gaunt and lantern-jawed, with a jutting beak for a nose and graying hay-colored hair and pale green eyes. He packed a leather-covered bible in one of the tail pockets of his rusty black frock coat, and a sawed-off Colt .45 in the other to balance the load on his lean hips.

"Long time, Deacon."

Lon Lomax had a drooping slim black mustache, and his eyes were opaque under heavy black brows that met above the bridge of his hawk nose. His voice was almost toneless.

Neither man offered a hand to the other, and they eyed each other warily and with suspicion. They dismounted and squatted on their bootheels facing each other. Each of them stayed back in the shadows and kept his back protected by the clay bank and brush.

Lomax spilled tobacco from a muslin sack into a brown cigarette paper and rolled it into shape. But he did not strike a match.

The ghost of a smile passed across Deacon's

smooth-shaven, funereal face. They sat there for long minutes, and neither man spoke. It was as if they were fighting a kind of silent war, and the man who broke the silence would be losing ground. Their hands stayed near their guns.

Then, about a hundred feet away, in the black shadows that shrouded the brushy river bank, a man sneezed.

Lon Lomax chuckled softly. Deacon Melgren scowled.

"One of them big overgrowed sons of yourn," said Lomax, "must be ketchin' himself a cold, Deacon."

"Hay fever," said Melgren. "My oldest son Martin gits troubled this time of year by hay fever."

Lon Lomax chuckled again. It was a toneless, unpleasant sound.

"Martin,' he said flatly, "would prob'ly be the first case ever known to die of hay fever."

"Meanin' how, Lomax?" the Deacon asked nasally.

"I give my boys their orders to kinda sift through the buckbrush, Deacon—cover your sons where they found 'em, but lay back and take 'er easy unless it seemed like I might be in a tight. Then they was to use their own judgment. They're good boys—cool headed, but quick-triggered once they start. Then they're hell to stop. . . . Like a checker game, ain't it? And I got more men than you got on the board. Your move, Deacon."

THE DEACON shifted uneasily. "I got a good deal for you, Lon. It'll beat the one the Association is offerin' you. How many men you got?"

"Half a dozen, the last range count I got on 'em."

"With my four boys," nodded Melgren, "that'll make a crew. It'll be pickin's. Holler to them curly wolves of yourn to let my boys be, Lon. Me'n you has got to make medicine."

"Supposin'," grinned Lomax thinly, "you just tell them four big overgrowed oxes of yourn to quit the brush and ride off a ways where I kin skylight 'em. My boys won't harm a hair of their lousy heads if they ain't crawlin' around through the brush. But if there's goin' to be a medicine talk, it's got to be just me'n you, Deacon, with nobody listenin' to ary word. . . . Your move, again."

Deacon Melgren spat a stream of tobacco juice and called to his four sons. "You, Martin! Matthew! Luther! Luke! Git your horses and ride back out yonder to that little rise. I'll holler if I need yuh."

Lon Lomax nodded as he watched four riders come out of the brush at scattered points and ride to the little rise about two hundred yards away. When they had met there on the low ridge and reined to a halt, Lomax lifted his voice to call to his men, hid in the brush.

"Back away, boys. But don't git too far off. Don't bother the Deacon's sons unless they git faunchy."

Then Lomax lit a match, cupped the flame and lit his cigarette. "Now drag this proposition of yourn out into the open, Deacon. Spread your soogans and I'll inspect 'em for lice an' nits." His opaque eyes were glittering.

"We already got a lot of cattle drifted to'rds the Montana line, Lon. A week, ten days, with your six men helpin', we'll have a herd gathered you'd have to raise your sights to shoot acrost. And a remuda of top horses to boot. If ary Association stock inspector tries to hold us up, there'll be enough of us to run 'im off. . . .

"I got my eye on a good location in Montana. South side of the Missouri. Plenty range. Good feed and water. It's layin' wide open and ready for our takin'. Mebbeso two-three little fellers to git shut of there. It's a cattleman's paradise, Lon, waitin' there fer us."

"I bin there," said Lon Lomax flatly. "I know the range. But if it was all of Montana and as big as Texas throwed in, it'd still be too damned cramped to hold me'n you for pardners, Deacon."

"We'll split the cattle when we git there. Cut the remuda in half. And once we git located, we'll divide the range up yonder after we git it clean of them little fellers."

"That's some better," nodded Lon Lomax.

HE MOVED a little to the edge of the shadow and whittled a willow branch to a point. He leveled and smoothed the dirt with the heel of his hand, then with the pointed stick he drew a map in the dirt. He talked as he drew.

"Here's the Missouri, Deacon. The river makes a bend and the Musselshell empties into the Missouri there at the bend. It's the strip of country west of the Musselshell and south of the Missouri that you got your eye on. These here are the cricks runnin' west to east to empty into the Musselshell. Crooked Crick . . . Dovetail Crick . . . Cat Crick . . . Blood Crick . . . Wood Crick.

"A lot of it's badlands, and then the hills and prairie country beyond the edge of the breaks. Water aplenty. Summer and winter range. You kin cut wild hay in every coulee . . . and your next winter's hay already cut and stacked at the little ranches on each of them cricks. All you got to do is kill off five ranchers. Little two-bit ranchers. And move in. That the range you had in mind, Deacon?" Lon Lomax grinned.

Melgren spat and nodded his head. His rusty black hat, dust-powdered and sweat-marked, slanted on his shaggy gray head. His

wide mouth twisted and his pale eyes were greedy looking.

"That's it, Lon. Just like you drawed it," he whined.

"And it's all yourn, Deacon," Lon Lomax grinned thinly. "You kin have it. All of it. You and your four long-legged sons."

"Then you're backin' out on the deal, Lon?"

"I'm makin' my own deal, Deacon. That range can't be split up between me'n you. It's too rough and slashed up by them cricks. Them four hungry-loop sons of yourn would steal me broke—unless my tough hands worked your range first. That'd mean a tangle. We'd make bad neighbors, Deacon. Because just the sight of any one of them big lantern-jawed sons of yourn makes me sick to my stummick. But if that wide Missouri was dividin' your range from mine, I might be able to stand it. . . . So I'll throw in with you and your four big whelps on one condition, Deacon. I git the big range north of the Missouri. Here it is on the map. . . ."

Again the pointed stick drew lines in the dirt.

"I'll claim this range on the north side of the Missouri, from the big bend on west. Half a dozen river ranches. And the open range behind the badlands. A thirty-mile strip along the river on the north side, as far as the Little Rockies with them little river ranches at the mouth of CK and Seven Mile, Rock Crick and Beauchamp on to Cow Island. . . What ails you, Deacon? You look green around the gills. Belly-ache?" Lon Lomax was grinning wickedly and his eyes were black agate.

"You must be locoed, Lomax!" Melgren's voice was a dismal whine. "That's the Moccasin Track range! Belongs to Moccasin Bob Kincaid and his son Jeff Kincaid!"

LON LOMAX marked that part of his ground map with a neat Moccasin brand, like the shape of a moccasin track in the dirt.

"Moccasin Bob Kincaid," said Lon Lomax tonelessly, "and his son Jeff Kincaid. What makes them any harder to kill than those little two-bit nesters? The Kincaids ain't bullet-proof, Deacon."

"Moccasin Bob is head of the Montana Cattlemen's Association!" Deacon Melgren's leathery skin was grayish now, beaded with cold sweat. Fear rasped his voice. "Jeff Kincaid was just elected sheriff!"

"The Moccasin Track was damn' near wiped out two years ago when the hard winter hit. The outfit's runnin' on borrowed money and just commencin' to shape up once more. The bank owns the Moccasin Track. And that tin star still don't make Jeff Kincaid bullet-proof." Lon Lomax's pointed willow stick was carefully changing the Moccasin Track brand into a neat Skull and Crossbones.

It was a warm August night, but Deacon Melgren in his rusty black frock coat shivered as if he'd had a sudden chill.

"I'd be no better off up in Montana, if we went after the Moccasin Track," he whined dismally, "than we are here in Wyoming. The big Wyoming outfits and their Association is runnin' me off here. If I start warrin' agin' the Kincaids in Montana it'll be jumpin' from the hot skillet into the fire. Martin an' Matthew got wives an' growin' fam'lies. . . . You're demandin' too much of a man, Lomax! We can't cut 'er!"

Lomax rubbed out the map in the dirt with the heel of his hand. Then he got to his feet and hitched up his slanted cartridge-belt with its notched wooden-handled six-shooter. His eyes were wicked. Suddenly his gun was in his hand, pointed at Deacon Melgren's long, lean belly.

"When this goes off, Deacon," he said flatly, "it'll be the signal my men are listenin' to hear. Them four sons of yourn make shore purty targets skylighted thataway. Those tough hands of mine don't shoot to miss. We bin promised a mighty fancy bounty on your hides, Deacon. I don't know of no easier way to earn the big money. Anyhow, the last time our trails crossed, it seems to me you got away with the best of a raw deal. You left me in the Dodge City jail, remember, Deacon? A bullet-hole in my hip. They'd have hung me or give me life in the Kansas pen, only I broke jail. Gut-shootin' you will be shore a pleasure, Deacon. And I'll git paid a thousand dollars for your stinkin' carcass. . . ."

There was cold-blooded murder in Lomax's black agate eyes, and his white teeth were bared in a wolfish grin. He thumbed back the hammer of his six-shooter.

Deacon Melgren's sweat-beaded face was as gray now as old ashes.

"You win, Lomax. Damn your black, murderin' soul into the deepest pits of Hell, you win. Put away that gun!"

Lomax chuckled softly. "Start your round-up at daybreak, Deacon. My men will be ridin' circle with you. Now fork your horse and take your four big whelps and get the hell outa my sight before I git thinkin' too strong about that Dodge City jail."

LOMAX watched Deacon Melgren join his sons, and when they had ridden out of sight, he called his half-dozen men.

"I made a deal with Deacon Melgren. We'll help him and his sons gather a quick herd and trail 'em to Montana. Unless the luck plays out, it'll beat bounty-huntin' here in Wyoming."

"It better," growled a big, bull-necked, swarthy man with a two-weeks' growth of dirty black whiskers. "What's our cut?"

"You'll draw fightin' wages, Heavy," said Lon Lomax coldly, "and you'll earn 'em before you git it laid on the line."

"The hell you say, Lon! If it's a stolen herd, we'll cut the fat pie. Share alike or it's no deal—"

The big black-whiskered man clawed for his gun, but he was too slow and clumsy. Lomax shot him twice in the belly, and when he toppled sideways off his horse and crashed to the ground, the bounty-hunter put a third .45 slug through the dying man's skull.

"Heavy," Lon Lomax's smoking six-shooters swung in a short arc that took in the other five riders, "was gittin' too big for his damn' britches. Anybody else hankerin' for an int'rest in the outfit? Too prideful to work for wages?"

They shook their heads. Nobody spoke. Their hands came slowly, reluctantly away from their guns. If Heavy had been acting as their spokesman, then he had made a fatal mistake of it. None of them had the guts to pick it up from there.

"Plant him, then," Lon Lomax nodded at the dead man. "Or leave him for the coyotes. But take his horse and saddle. Damn the big fourflushin' son, leavin' me short-handed thataway."

A mile or so away, Deacon Melgren and his four tough sons had heard the three shots and pulled up, listening.

"If there's a Almighty Gawd," said Deacon Melgren, "He'd see to it that Lon Lomax stopped one of them bullets."

Then they rode on to the Deacon's ranch.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hell Hits the Moccasin Track

MOCCCASIN BOB KINCAID was short, heavy-set, and bowlegged. He had thick iron-gray hair and a drooping gray mustache that hid the hard corners of a straight-lipped mouth.

Bob Kincaid had been a buckskin scout with Indian fighters like General Miles and Crook. Jim Bridger had been one of his boon companions on many a dangerous job and drinking bout. At the end of the Indian wars, a grateful government had given him his choice of land, and he had gone into the cattle business in Montana. He bought more land, married, settled down. Now his whole life was wrapped up in his big Moccasin Track outfit, his wife, and his only son Jefferson.

Jeff was thirty years old. He stood five feet eight in his sock feet and had the wide shoulders and deep chest of a prize-fighter. Whenever some drifting prize ring fighter showed up in town, the saloon men would hold him and his manager there until they could get hold of Jeff Kincaid, and they'd give odds that Jeff would knock the professional cold. Usually they collected.

"And why not?" Moccasin Bob's eyes would twinkle. "Cost me many a carload of beef steers givin' Jeff a college education, and as far as I've ever found out, boxin' was all he learnt there."

But Jeff Kincaid was a cowman, and a good one. Besides being a good bronc rider and a fast roper, Jeff had the savvy it takes to handle a beef herd, and he knew without trying how to handle a crew of cowpunchers.

Jeff's wide, easy grin and his good-natured ways made him a top-hand wagon boss. The tougher the breaks, the wider Jeff's grin.

Now and then some new cowhand would mistake Jeff's good nature for weakness, and Jeff would have to correct that impression with his fists. A man twice Jeff's size would dazedly shake his head and lift himself up off the ground after Jeff had knocked him down. If the whipped cowpuncher was the right sort and worth keeping, Jeff would grin and shake hands.

Mostly the Moccasin Track cowpunchers stayed on year after year, wintering in the line camps feeding cattle, riding fence and pulling bog during the summer between calf and beef round-ups. And when they got old or stove-up they stayed on with Moccasin Bob at the ranch, pensioned off like the old cow-horses in the lower pasture.

The Moccasin Track was, the cow country said, a good outfit to work for. That told the tale.

Once a new stock inspector had arrested a little rancher for butchering a Moccasin Track beef. Bob Kincaid had flared up into one of his rare bursts of temper.

"Don't ever make that mistake again!" he said. "That feller has a wife and kids to feed. He ain't got twenty head of beef steers in his own iron. Why the hell shouldn't he butcher one of mine? Where'd yuh find the hide?"

"Hangin' on his fence."

"Brand cut out?"

"No sir. But—"

"No damned Buts about it. He'd 'a' showed me or Jeff the Moccasin Track hide next time one of us rode there. Worked it out if I'd let 'im. If that's stealin' in your book, you better turn in that law badge."

THE cow-country would have run Moccasin Bob Kincaid for Senator, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said the only way they'd ever get him to make a speech at the Legislature would be to get him drunk, and when he got drunk he said the wrong thing at the wrong time, and when he put on a hard-boiled shirt he felt like a mule looking over a whitewashed fence.

But when Legislature was in session and the cowmen were getting some bill put through, Moccasin Bob would pack his grip and go to Helena.

"There ain't a drop of likker under twelve years old at the Montana Club," he'd excuse himself, "and them poker games is worth settin' into. . . ."

"What's the truth of your strippin' down to a britch-clout and moccasins," Jeff asked, "and doin' a war dance in the lobby of the Placer Hotel?"

"They bin lyin' to yuh, son. I had on my drawers and undershirt. Drawers, anyhow."

"The red flannels?"

"What the hell else I got?"

Jeff Kincaid didn't want the sheriff job, but there were a lot of tough customers drifting up from Wyoming. Renegades of all kinds, moving into the Montana badlands—stealing horses, rustling cattle.

"It ain't for long, Jeff," the cowmen argued. "Just till we clean up the country. We need a man like you fer the job. Somebody cool-headed, with enough guts. And when you need a posse, we'll foller you though hell and back."

So Jeff Kincaid showed up at the home ranch one noon with a sheriff badge pinned to his shirt. He had spent the past week at the annual meeting of the Cattlemen's Association at Fort Benton.

"That Fort Benton forty-rod likker," Jeff grinned faintly at a couple or three grizzled old cowhands at the barn, "throws a man and hogties 'im. I was wearin' this tin star when I woke up in the back room of some saloon."

"Looks like Moccasin Bob woulda rode closer herd on yuh, Jeff."

"Moccasin Bob," grinned Jeff, "was the son of a gun that ribbed 'em into pinnin' it on me. . . .. So walk slow, you ringtailed rannihans, and speak easy. You're lookin' at the Law."

Cheats us outa free election likker."

"There's a quart," grinned Jeff Kincaid, "in each saddle pocket. But don't ask me to join yuh. I'm workin' on crick water."

MA KINCAID was a buxom, apple cheeked ranch woman with Irish blue eyes and streaks of silver in her thick curly copper colored hair. She hid her fears behind a gay smile as she admired the sheriff badge pinned to her son Jeff's blue flannel shirt.

"At least, with the Law in the family, you'll be able to get that father of yours out of jail. Him and his moccasins. I was sixteen when I met him at Fort Benton. The early morning I sighted a black-haired young hellion ridin' his horse bareback up and down the street, wearin' nothing but a breech-clout, an eagle feather in his hair and moccasins. I'd gone to the Chinaman's for the laundry. And in he came and he was goin' to scalp the queues off the Chinaman and I ducked in behind the counter and the Chinee were ki-yi-yin' and he was war whoopin'.

"Then he caught sight of me. I stopped that war dancer then and there in his moccasin tracks. I've a wicked tongue when I want to use it. And then I got to laughin', and that turned the trick. He went out like he'd been shot at and grazed. . . . We were married two weeks later. It was love at first sight, he claims to this day. But I had him dressed in a white stiff shirt and a black suit and his boots too tight and his collar chokin' him. . . . It's a solid gold badge, Jeff. You look handsome in it. I'll say a bit of a prayer for you, and you'll have every pretty girl in the cow-country after you now. Sheriff Jeff Kincaid!"

Now it was six months since he'd been sworn in as sheriff and Jeff Kincaid reckoned he'd need that bit of a prayer—and his saddle gun. News had reached the Moccasin Track that the country south of the Missouri had been invaded by the toughest renegade outfit that had ever come out of the war-torn cattle range of Wyoming.

"Deacon Melgren and his four sons," said the rancher from Crooked Creek, south of the Missouri River. "And a gun-slinger named Lon Lomax. They killed old man Jenks on Dovetail. Murdered the two Harper boys on Cat Crick. Burned out Deefy Smith on Wood Crick. Run off two ranchers on Wood Crick and them fellers on Blood Crick has turned up missin'.

"Them Melgrens is claimin' all the country south of the Missouri and west of the Musselshell. They taken over the tradin' post and saloon at the Musselshell Crossin' on the Missouri, there at the big bend. Killed the squaw-man Cree Jones that was runnin' it. His squaw got away acrost the river and made it afoot to the sub-agency at Lodge Pole on the Fort Belknap Reservation. . . . You're the sheriff, Jeff. Round up a posse—I'm the first un' you kin deputize. What this country needs right now is some first-class hangin's."

"South of the Missouri," said Jeff, "ain't in my country, Uncle Dan."

"Don't look like a thing like a country line 'ud stop Moccasin Bob Kincaid's son."

"It don't," grinned Jeff, "for a fact."

"Then you're takin' after them murderin', thievin' damned—"

"As quick as I can saddle a horse, Uncle Dan."

"You'll need anyhow a dozen good men, Jeff."

"You can take that up with Moccasin Bob," said Jeff. He's in town loadin' the mess wagon and keepin' the round-up cook sober, or else gettin' him drunker. They should be back

by tomorrow. The outfit commences beef work next week. The boys are mostly in town for a last spree before I commence sweatin' 'em. . . . There's a jug in the harness room. Supper will be ready by the time you are. Take 'er easy till Moccasin Bob and the outfit shows up. Tell Bob I've taken me a ride down to the Musselshell Crossin'."

"Whoa, young feller! You ain't tacklin' that outfit lone-handed!"

"Why not, Uncle Dan? Like you said, I'm the Law. Though I've mislaid that damn' badge somewheres. It ketches on somethin' every time I turn around. Tears hunks outa all my shirts. Might be I put it in my warsack. I'll look in the bunkhouse. . . . Help yourself to the jug, Uncle Dan."

UNCLE DAN CURTIS was tall and rangy, with skin like sun-baked rawhide and faded blue eyes. He grunted, "Looky here, son. I've seen 'em all. The Earp boys at Tombstone. Bat Masterson at Dodge City. Ary one of them seasoned gun-fighters would think twice before they tackled Deacon Melgren and his boys and that Lon Lomax, single-handed. Them Wyoming renegades is hard citizens. You ever kill a man, Jeff?"

"Never even shot at a man, Uncle Dan," grinned Jeff Kincaid. "These so-called badmen spook mighty easy. I don't look for trouble down there."

"You don't need to look fer it. Deacon Melgren and Lon Lomax'll fetch it to your door. Lomax brags he's takin' over the Moccasin Track. Don't be a damned young smart aleck, son. Gather a posse of men that'll shoot to kill. By the hell, you think I spook easy? They rode up on me when I didn't have no gun. Take a look at this!"

The old Texan untied the black silk neckscarf he had knotted around his throat. His neck was marked by a raw, livid rope welt.

"Them dirty sons strung me up to the ridgepole of my own cabin. Then they cut me down and told me to quit the country because the next time they wouldn't be foolin'."

Jeff's grin faded and the humorous twinkle died in his blue-gray eyes. He lifted his sweat-marked hat and scratched his wiry black hair.

"I'll make a deal with you, Uncle Dan. You ride on to town after supper and tell Moccasin Bob the story. I'll slip on down there to the Musselshell Crossin' and look 'em over. The round-up can camp there in the bend, when you git there. I'll meet you there sometime tomorrow night, or next day. Better have the cook put some salve on that neck. Ma'd fix you up, but she's gone to Fort Benton. Somebody she knows is havin' a baby or somethin'. Or mebbe somebody gittin' married. . . .

"Married!" Uncle Dan took a big drink and corked the jug. "There'll be a weddin' tomorrow night at the Musselshell Crossin'. Lon Lomax is marryin' Deacon Melgren's only daughter. The Deacon's performin' the ceremony. They'll all be drunk. A good time fer us to ketch 'em off guard."

Uncle Dan was warmed by the whisky now. His faded blue eyes brightened. Color came into his rawhide-colored face. He said he didn't need grub. He'd fill a pint bottle from the jug and take it along to nip at on the road to town. He'd fetch Moccasin Bob Kincaid and the Moccasin Track cowpunchers to the big bend and Jeff could meet them there tomorrow evening.

"Don't git within gun-range of any of them renegades, though," he warned Jeff. "Just bush up there in the big bend. Injun up on 'em. Watch what's goin' on. But don't cross the Missouri. Stay on this side of the river. Them renegades has done murder. They'll be almighty damn superstitious about ary stranger ridin' up on 'em. They'll shoot you on sight and read your brand on your dead carcass, then throw it in the river. Mind what I'm a-tellin' yuh, Jeff."

Jeff Kincaid shoved his .30-30 carbine into his saddle scabbard and headed for the bunkhouse to look for his law badge. Uncle Dan located an empty pint bottle, washed it at the pump and filled it from the jug. Then he saddled the fresh Moccasin Track gelding Jeff showed him. They nodded their so-longs and rode separate ways.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Shoot-Out at Boothill Crossing

IT WAS about six hours' steady riding on a good horse from the Moccasin Track home ranch to the ranch in the big bend of the Missouri that Moccasin Bob used for the main linecamp in winter. Jeff Kincaid rode at a long trot that ate up the miles of rolling hills and stretches of benchland and flats.

When he reached the edge of the badlands, he cut away from the main trail and picked a dim path that was a shortcut for a rider and horse who knew it, but a blind trail that lost a stranger. He rode warily, with his right hand near his gun, and slowed down to a more cautious gait as he threaded his way through the broken badlands. It was long past midnight when he reached the log cabins and sheds and the pole corrals of the big bend ranch.

It was deserted this time of year. The breed hay crew had finished their haying, and moved on to their next camp. The new stacks loomed against the moonlit sky in the barbed-wire hay corrals behind the cattle sheds and big log barn, the barbed-wire gates tied shut. The

big pole gates of the round pole corrals were open and fastened back as they should be. The doors of the cook cabin and long log bunkhouse were shut, barn doors closed.

But Jeff Kincaid did not ride out into the moonlit clearing, where the brush had been grubbed out and the ground cleared to leave only the giant cottonwoods for shade. He sat his horse back in the black shadows of the willows, watching, listening, his hand on his six-shooter. He distrusted the peaceful silence here.

Jeff was no patient waiter. He was getting restless when he sighted the horse and rider coming along the sandy, brush-flanked road from Fort Musselshell Crossing. The rider was almost to the edge of the clearing when two men on horseback spurred out of the brush, slamming their horses into the lone rider's mount. As the three horses milled in a tight tangle, a woman's voice sounded in the midst of the scuffling.

"Let me alone! Damn you! Let me go!"

The man called Blackie let go of his torn ear long enough to pull a bottle from his chaps pocket. He took a long pull at it, corked it and shoved it back Then he crowded his horse alongside the girl's.

"I like 'em when they turn wildcat," he leered at her as she twisted in her saddle to get out of his reach. "Slim, there, is scairt of his horses. Deal him out. I'm your gent. I ain't scairt of Lon Lomax or Deacon Melgren. You string along with me, sweetheart, and me'n you will—"

"I'd rather travel with a hydrophobia skunk." The girl's voice was brittle. "Quit pawing at me, Blackie. Let me alone!"

"You're drunk, Blackie," snarled the other man, "and locoed. Quit maulin' at 'er or I'll—"

"You'll what, you white livered—?"

Blackie's gun spat a short streak of fire as Slim pulled his six-shooter. The three horses spooked. Slim fell limply across his saddle horn, blood spilling from his open mouth. He

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A man's rasping laugh. Another man's voice, thick with anger, cussing her for a damned she-wildcat.

"Take it easy, Molly. We'd shore hate to skin up Lon's purty bride. Tie her hands behind her, Slim. She's got my face clawed—"

"Lon's orders, Molly. Don't blame us. We're just hired hands. You shouldn't orter run off from your bridegroom thataway."

"Mebby a big hug an' kiss is what she needs to quiet 'er down, Slim. Damned clawin' little devil. I got a mind tuh—"

There was a snarling howl of pain. "Damn 'er! She chawed my ear damn' near off! I'll learn 'er!"

THE horses untangled. One of the men was leading the girl's horse now and she sat her saddle stiffly, her hands tied behind her back. The other rider followed, his left hand clamped against his torn ear, cursing thickly.

Jeff Kincaid got a look at her now as they rode within a stone's throw of where he sat his horse in the brush. She wore cowpuncher clothes. From under her Stetson hat her hair hung down in two heavy braids. One of the braids had come unplaited and the hair flowed like a dark golden tassel to her slim waist.

slid forward and one leg went into the air as his horse jumped. Then he crashed down on his head and shoulders and lay there in a distorted heap.

The girl's horse jumped and whirled and began bucking. Though she was a good rider her hands were tied behind her back and she was pitched off balance and thrown. She landed heavily and lay without moving, her tawny hair spilled across the ground under her head.

BLACKIE swung from his saddle. He kicked the dead Slim viciously to make certain the man was no longer dangerous to him. His teeth were bared in an evil grin as he bent over the girl. He was breathing hard through the splayed nostrils of his flat nose, and sweat trickled down his yellow face. He had hold of the girl's shoulders when Jeff Kincaid rode out from behind the brush.

"Claw for the moon!" barked Jeff.

Blackie, squatted on his hunkers, let go of the girl and the gun in his right hand spewed flame. Jeff Kincaid heard the whine of the bullet past his head, and he fired without reining up his running horse. Blackie's second shot went wild and Jeff's next bullet plowed into the renegade's brisket. Blackie's gun

dropped from his hand. He pitched sideways and forward. He was dead when Jeff swung from his saddle and stood looking at the girl, who had rolled over into a sitting position.

"You got here like you'd been sent for," her voice was unsteady. "I was playing possum. Another second and I'd have kicked that half-breed in the guts, then tromped him—tromped him to death."

Then anger blazed in her smoky gray eyes. "Don't just stand there grinning. Untie me. I'm Molly Melgren. Who are you?"

She was, Jeff Kincaid told himself, the prettiest girl he'd ever looked at. Anger only made her more attractive. He stepped over the dead Blackie, squatted on his boot-heels and jerked loose the hogging string that bound her wrists.

"I'm Jeff Kincaid. You needn't start clawin' and bitin'. And if it's all the same to you, lady, let's back up into the shadow. Some of your gun-slingin' outfit might show up, and I don't want to die young."

Jeff reached down, took her hand and pulled her to her feet. She'd lost her hat and her other braid had come undone. When she shook out her heavy, tawny mane the top of her head came just below his shoulder. She was smiling up uncertainly at him, none too steady on her feet. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her mouth. She did not flinch or try to pull away, but she was no longer smiling and her smoky gray eyes were looking at him searchingly.

"Why did you have to do that?" she asked.

"Darned if I know. I wish I hadn't. You've had enough maulin' around. But I didn't mean it like that. I'd feel better if you'd haul off and slap me. Then tell me what kind of a tight you're in and let me help you out of it."

THE expression in her eyes changed. She smiled faintly. Then she took his face in her hands, stood on her toes and kissed him square on the mouth.

"That's for saving my life, Jeff. I couldn't have handled that big yellow mongrel. I was headed for your place—let's get our horses and hit the trail. I'll tell you about it as we go.

"The Deacon and Lomax and the rest are back in the badlands on the other side of the river. Martin's and Matthew's wives were riding close herd on me. Their brats have measles or something. I offered to take care of the kids if they'd unlock the door of the dugout where the Deacon had me locked up, and they fell for it. I knocked their heads together and necked 'em together by their hair. I bet they'll need shears to get themselves unbraided. It's the only fun I've had in a long time."

"You don't speak too well of your father and the man you're supposed to marry," grinned Jeff.

"Thank God that whining hypocrite isn't my real father. He sold me to Lon Lomax like an Injun. I got the truth out of Luther and Luke, when they got drunk and were cooking up a bushwhack trap for Lomax. After Lomax was dead, the Deacon had me promised to whichever of them killed him.

"I'm the daughter of a Wyoming cowman they killed when they moved in on Powder River. I was just a kid in pigtails—too young to remember much about my father and mother except that my mother died and my father was killed and his name was Hank Curtis. They'd have killed me, only the Deacon's wife figured I'd come in handy in a few years when I was old enough to do house chores. But I was handier with a ketch-rope than I ever was with a broom and mop, so the Deacon had me wrangling horses when I was old enough to make a hand. And I ran away tonight. And if you'll stake me to a fresh horse when we get to the Moccasin Track, I'll travel along."

"Where to?" grinned Jeff Kincaid.

"Just yonderly. Across the skyline."

Jeff looked at her and shook his head.

She was plaiting her hair into two heavy braids again. Jeff watched her, grinning faintly.

"Moccasin Bob," he said, "would disown me sure if I let you go. And anyhow, even if I was willin' to let you head off yonderly, Ma would manage somehow to talk you into stayin' till you got acquainted. Next to a wake, Moccasin Bob likes a weddin'. And till you've seen Moccasin Bob dance a moccasin weddin' dance, you ain't see much. . . . You was bitin' off that yellow 'breed's ear when I first caught sight of you. . . ."

Jeff was hanging onto both her hands now. She looked up at him and her gray eyes studied him. They stood like that for a long minute and she then broke the silence.

"You're really asking me to marry you, Jeff Kincaid."

"Yes—Molly Curtis."

"Think it over, Jeff. Slowly. Carefully. Right now."

Jeff's grip on her hands tightened. "I'm askin' you to be my wife."

"I'll do my best, Jeff, to be everything a wife should be for the man who loves her. The man I love. I never hoped I could be this happy. I'm afraid I'm going to bawl, now."

It was almost daybreak when Jeff left her long enough to dig a grave, bury the two dead renegades and cover that grave so that it could not be found. Then he hid the guns and saddles and hazed the two horses belonging to the dead men into the badlands on good feed and water. He rode with Molly to the head of the breaks, sent her on to the Moccasin Track, then rode back alone to the ranch in the big bend.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Payoff in Blood

JEFF KINCAID swam his horse across the river above the round-up crossing. It was the black hour before daybreak, after the moon had set and the shadows thickened. Nobody sighted him crossing the swift black river, and there was no ambush waiting on the south banks when he rode in behind the willows to pull on his boots and tighten his saddle cinch.

His horse shook itself, and the stirrups rattled noisily in the darkness. But there was nobody around to hear. And when he slipped down the river trail just as day was breaking, Jeff savvied why he had crossed without being challenged.

They were all there at the Crossing. Lon Lomax and three hard-looking, heavily-armed cowpunchers. Deacon Melgren and his two older sons, the first set of twins born to carry the Melgren name. Martin and Matthew, Martin the older by one hour. Martin and Matthew stood behind the frock-coated Deacon, their hands on their guns. They faced Lon Lomax and his three renegades across a wide, deep grave that had just been dug.

Deacon Melgren's second pair of twins, Luther and Luke, were there. But they lay dead on the ground, and their bullet-torn bodies were wrapped in dirty bed tarps, ready for burial. Luther and Luke had been caught in their own bushwhack gun-trap.

"This," Lon Lomax's flat voice fell across the silence, "should learn Luther and Luke a lesson to stay sober when they got gun-chores to tend to."

Martin and Matthew glared at Lomax and his tough cowhands. Deacon Melgren's face was as gray as the shale cutbank behind the river; gray as the daylit sky that was the color of gun lead.

Deacon Melgren took the old dirt-glazed bible from the tail pocket of his rusty black coat. His dirty gray hair hung dankly to his shoulders. Martin and Matthew bared their heads, their right hands on their guns.

Deacon Melgren stood by the open double-grave, and without looking into the open pages of the battered old bible, keeping his bleak stare fixed on Lon Lomax, he preached his funeral sermon.

It was a fanatical harangue that lauded the nonexistent virtues of Luther and Luke, giving his dead sons a worth they never owned. And in that same dismal whine he condemned his sons' murderers to eternal hell-fire.

"Amen!" Melgren finished. And it was like the pointing of a warning finger.

"He's bin holdin' the Book upside down," said one of Lon Lomax's renegades, his hoarse whisky whisper carrying to where Jeff crouched behind the brush. "I told you the damned old buzzard didn't know how to read. That's ten bucks yuh owe me, pardner."

Melgren did not seem to hear. He closed the bible and shoved it back into the tail pocket of his coat. He picked up his hat and saddle gun, and nodded at Martin and Matthew.

"Bury your murdered brothers."

Deacon Melgren turned slowly and walked away, his head lowered and his shoulders sagging, his gait a long-legged shuffle.

Lomax grinned thinly. "The Deacon shore savvies how to slough the pick and shovel chores onto somebody. Good thing you boys is twins."

Martin waited until the Deacon was out of sight. Then he pawed around in the brush and pulled out a jug. He took a long pull at it and handed it to his twin brother Matthew.

"While you fellers is doin' all that fancy bettin'," leered Matthew, "I'll give you odds, Lon, that there won't be no weddin' here tonight."

"I'll call that bet," said Lon flatly. "Luther and Luke quittin' him in a tight kinda leaves the Deacon short-handed. It's that and no kinda grief that's hamstrung 'im. I'm paying him for Molly, twice, ten times what any female's worth. Deacon ain't the man to let a deal like that slip through his dirty hands."

"It ain't the Deacon," Matthew's leering grin twisted sideways across his lantern jaw, "that I got in mind."

"Damn it all, Matthew," snarled Martin, "shut your trap. What you wanta be runnin' off at the head fer? Me'n you agreed to keep shut. I had hell enough slappin' them wimmin' of ourn quiet. Now you git the likker slobbers!"

"Meanin' what, boys?" Lon Lomax's voice cut like a sharp knife.

"Take a look in the dugout, Lon," leered Matthew. "Take a look at what yuh don't see locked up there. Your almost-bride done flew the coop!"

LON LOMAX made a visible effort to fight down the terrible fury that burned through him. He sent one of his men to the dugout in the side of a little hill behind the cabins, ordered a second man to cross the river and find out if Slim and Blackie had sighted Molly.

Matthew was grinning as he told his twin brother Martin to grab aholt of Luther's shoulders while he took the feet.

"We'll have to drop him'n Luke in. Damned if I'm goin' to git down in that hole no more. Not with Lon on the prod. Hell, he might take advantage of a feller down in a

hole thataway. Grab aholt, Martin. Yo-heave!"

The two tarp-shrouded bodies thudded heavily into the double grave. Matthew and Martin picked up shovels.

Matthew spat on his hands and grinned across the grave. "That bet still on, Lon? Make it the saloon. Them barrels of booze. I always had a hankerin' fer to own a whole damn saloon full of likker."

"Keep on like you're doin' now," snarled Lon Lomax, "and all you'll ever own is a hole like you'n Martin is fillin' with them ornery brothers of yourn. There's just too many of you Melgrens, anyhow."

Too late now, the loose-mouthed Matthew discovered his mistake. He'd underestimated, miscalculated the insane killing hatred that warped the murderous heart of Lon Lomax. Matthew read the murder sign in Lon's red-black eyes and dropped his shovel. He was reaching for his gun when Lon Lomax killed him. Then Martin dropped his shovel and clawed for his six-shooter, and Lomax's second bullet caught him in the guts. His long legs buckled at the knees and he went down grabbing at his bullet-torn belly.

Matthew, shot through the mouth, toppled heavily into the open grave and crashed down on top of his two dead brothers. Lon sent a bullet into Martin's skull to finish off the dying man. Then he jumped across the open grave and kicked Martin into the hole.

The renegade with Lomax had jerked his gun. He stood there, half drunk, bewildered by the sudden murders, while Lomax dove into the brush. He was standing there alone when Deacon Melgren, alarmed by the shooting, came running out of the barn, gripping his saddle carbine in both hands.

The renegade saw him and fired, missed. Melgren's Winchester cracked, and the renegade staggered off balance. The Deacon's next shot dropped him in his tracks.

The man Lon had sent to the dugout came out now, his gun in his hand. The Deacon sighted him and his carbine spat fire. He was levering a fresh cartridge into the breech when the man pitched headlong and rolled down the slope.

"An eye fer an eye!" the Deacon screamed. "Vengeance is mine saith—"

FROM behind a heavy screen of buckbrush Lon Lomax lifted his .30-30 to his shoulder, lined his sights and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck Deacon Melgren's open, screaming mouth and tore a gaping hole at the base of his skull.

The broken hills tossed the last gun-echoes back and forth and gave way to a silence that was worse than the guns.

Lon Lomax strode out of the brush. There was a six-shooter in his hand and his white teeth showed in a wolfish grin. He carried his .30-30 saddle carbine in the crook of his left arm. His red-black eyes were glittering as he started for the log saloon.

The renegade he had sent across the river rode up now. He and his horse were dripping wet from crossing the river, over and back. He'd heard the shooting and hurried back. Now he pulled to a halt, staring at the dead Deacon and the two dead renegades.

"Well?" snapped Lomax. "What the hell ails you? Never see a dead carcass till now? You want to see two more, look in the grave. Martin and Matthew dug their own hole in the ground. Where's Slim and Blackie?"

"Slim and Blackie ain't there. No sign of the girl. There's tracks. Dried blood on the ground. One of her hair ribbons—"

He was the proverbial bearer of evil tidings. Lon Lomax was in no kind of humor to digest bad news.

The renegade's next words voiced his own death sentence. He realized it too late. "Looks like you shore gone into wholesale butcher business, Lon. How many notches on that gun of yourn now?"

No killer wants to leave alive any eye-witness to his murders. Lon Lomax's teeth bared.

"You'll make just one more," he said flatly, and shot from the level of his slanted cartridge belt. The bullet hit the renegade in the belly and ranged upward to break his spine. He was screaming when he toppled from his saddle, dead when his spooked horse whirled and threw him.

JEFF KINCAID felt nauseated, sick to his very soul. He rose from his crouching position and walked out of the brush. The sun was just coming up over the broken badlands, and its first slanting rays struck the gold star pinned to his blue flannel shirt.

"I'm Sheriff Jeff Kincaid," he called out. "Drop that gun!"

The sudden shock of Jeff's appearance, the gold sheriff's star shining in the sun, must have jangled Lon Lomax's taut nerves. It was the first shot he'd missed—the bullet creased Jeff's ribs. Then Jeff's six-shooter was spewing streaks of flame. He sent three heavy .45 slugs into Lon Lomax's belly and chest while the killer lurched like a drunken man.

Sheriff Jeff Kincaid was taking no chances. He sent a last slug crashing into Lon Lomax's black-haired skull.

Jeff had to get away from here before he was sick. He almost ran, back up the twisting brushy river trail to where he'd left his horse. He swung up into the saddle and rode into the river, and when his horse hit the strip of swimming water in the channel, Jeff scooped

up the cold water in his hat and sloshed his head and face with it.

His horse was splashing ashore on the north bank when he heard the sounds of men and horses. Then saw them coming—Moccasin Bob and Uncle Dan Curtis riding up in the lead. Between them rode Molly, and behind them trooped the Moccasin Track cowhands. All of them had saddle guns.

"You can put up your artillery." Jeff managed a stiff-lipped grin. "It's all over but the buryin'. . . . If you got a bottle on your flank, Bob, gimme. And don't expect a drop of it back."

"Where's Lon Lomax?" asked Uncle Dan.

"I killed Lomax." Jeff took a big drink from Moccasin Bob's bottle.

"Deacon Melgren?"

"Dead." Jeff took another swallow.

"Them four big sons of the Deacon's?"

"Dead," said Jeff, "and all four in the same grave. Only Martin and Matthew ain't wearin' their bed tarps." He tilted the bottle.

"How many," asked Uncle Dan Curtis, "is there left fer us to hang?"

"Nary a one, Uncle Dan." Jeff took a last drink, corked the bottle and handed it back to Moccasin Bob. "They're dead. There ain't a man alive at Musselshell Crossin'. But don't take my word for it. Ride over and have a look."

THEY were all staring at him. From across the river sounded the wailing screams of the two women. Jeff shuddered and reached for the bottle. Moccasin Bob held it out of his reach.

Molly looked white, and her eyes were dark with dread. Jeff reached out and grabbed her hand.

"You stay here, Molly. You can't do 'em any good. And I don't want you to see any part of it."

He looked at Moccasin Bob. "It was wolf kill wolf, Bob. I had to look at it and it wasn't somethin' you'd want to see again for a show. And then there was only Lon Lomax left. I had to kill him—like you'd kill a mad dog. He was the only one I killed."

Uncle Dan Curtis was already shoving his horse into the river and the Moccasin Track cowhands were right behind him.

"He's my real uncle, Jeff," said Molly. "My father was Uncle Dan Curtis's brother. Though they hadn't seen one another in years. Lost track of each other. . . . Jeff, you're hurt! There's blood all over your shirt!"

Jeff felt of his bullet-nicked ribs and grinned. "I got off almighty lucky. Creased. Don't even hurt. Ain't she somethin' for a cowhand to fetch home, Bob?"

"Your ma," chuckled Moccasin Bob, "always hankered for a girl daughter. Looks like she's shore got one. She'll spoil her, Jeff."

"I could use a lot of that kind of spoiling," said Molly. "I hate to ever look at those two terrible women again, or their horrible brats. But I'd better go over there. . . ."

"Not on your sweet young life you won't," said Moccasin Bob. "You take Molly home to her ma, Jeff. Me'n Uncle Dan will tend to them chores. Git fer the home ranch, the pair of yuh. . . . Want another snort of likker, son?"

Jeff shook his head. "Don't need it."

"Thought not. By grab, you're a shore handsome pair. Don't git lost on the way home."

It was just as Molly told Jeff on their way to the ranch. All that the wailing widows of Martin and Matthew Melgren wanted now was money. They loaded their belongings and kids in two wagons and pulled out for Missouri where they'd come from.

A month later Jeff and Molly were married. Uncle Dan gave the bride way. Moccasin Bob took off his boots and danced in his moccasins.

"But Ma's got her eye on me," he chuckled as he danced with the bride. "If I even look like I was gonna skin off this boiled shirt, I'd hate to think what she'd do. But till you seen Moccasin Bob dance a real war dance, you ain't seen nothin', Molly."

"Some other time, Moccasin Bob," laughed Molly. "Promise?"

"It's a deal. Now who's this young smart aleck a-comin' to claim the last dance? Rank stranger amongst us. Somebody musta shore left the gate open. What's the name, stranger?"

Jeff grinned and pinned the gold sheriff's star on Moccasin Bob's wilted hard-boiled shirt.

The name is plain Jeff, Sheriff Moccasin Bob. And don't disgrace the law badge by peelin' down to your red flannels. Lady, can I have the honor of this waltz?"

And as he put his arm around her waist she was smiling. Her dark smoke-gray eyes were shining like stars through a mist, and she said it was because she was so happy.

"Shucks, Ma," said Moccasin Bob as he waltzed out on the floor with his wife, "you cryin'?"

"Of course I'm crying, you bonehead. What mother wouldn't cry? Look at them, Bob. Jeff. Molly. Ours. Our own son and daughter, Bob."

"Yep."

Moccasin Bob, the best all-around dancer in Montana Territory, missed a step. He blinked his eyes and muttered something about his collar choking a man to death.

THE END

Bill saw Matt Gower raise the carbine. . . .

# THE GUNSIGHT GHOST FILLS HIS HAND

**When the dark stranger rode into Gunsight, Mark Purdy said: "My God! I helped hang him!" But Brimstone Bill, indeed, was riding back from his twelve-year old grave—to prove, in powder-smoke and blood, that freedom does not die with the men who defend it!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Brimstone Bill

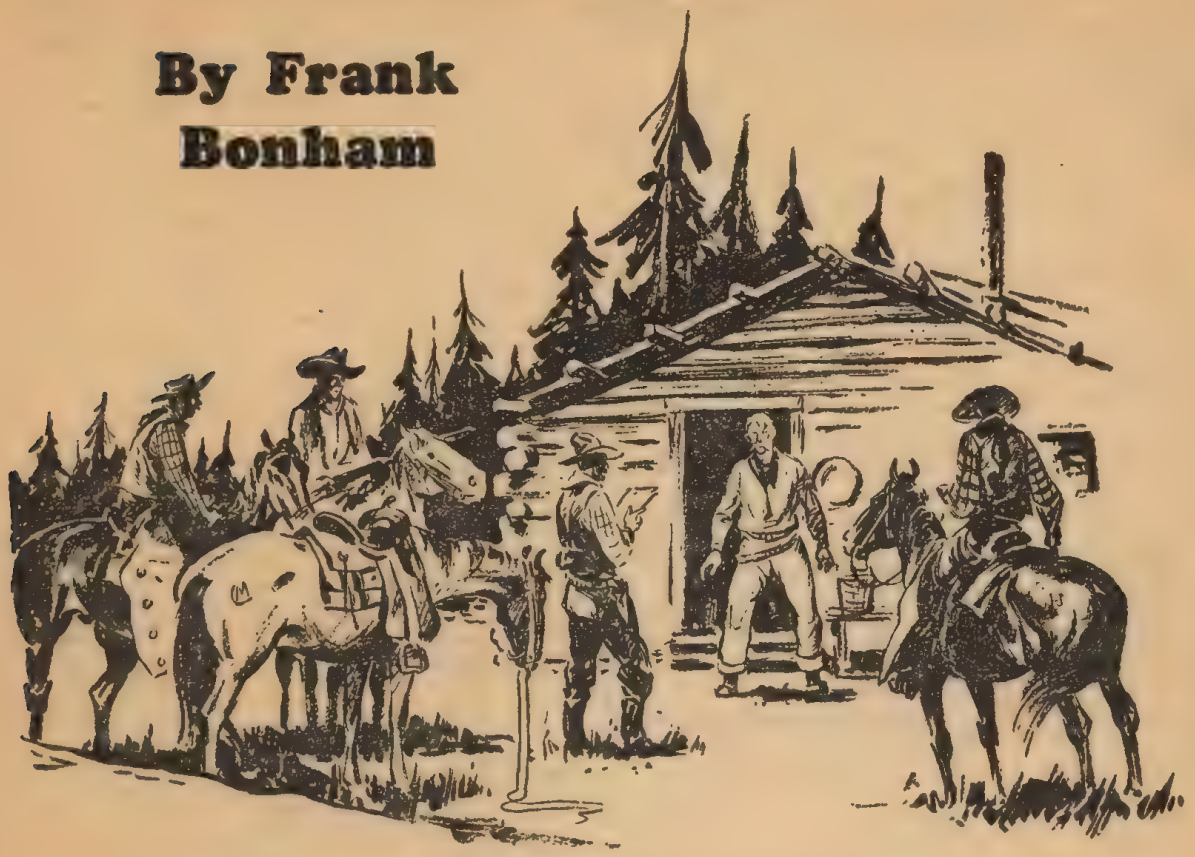
BRIMSTONE BILL THATCHER came back to Gunsight on a day when the Territorial sun was high and hot over the mountain town. In the glory-hole gouged into the defrosted canyon slopes, pickaxe and single-jack rang and grated; a carload of ore went rattling down a grizzly and the canyon played ball with the echoes. Silver Creek bubbled and flashed diagonally across the canyon town. There was the warbling sound of birds in the lodgepole pines and postoaks beyond the town limits.

Altogether, it was a quiet, green summer day. Not at all the kind of day for ghosts. But the three men who had most reason to fear Brimstone Bill were sitting on the gallery of the Mountain House when the outlaw rode past, and although they all had the strength to rise to their feet and let their drinks crash to the puncheon floor, only one had the ability to speak, and what he said was:

"My God! It *can't* be! I helped hang him!"

This was bearded Mark Purdy, heavy-jowled ex-president of the defunct Silver City and Denver Railroad. The faces of his companions, Ed Clint, who ran the Gateway to Hell Saloon, and Mike Moriarty, Purdy's

# By Frank Bonham



gun-lieutenant, were a fish-belly gray. Ed Clint began to make nervous movements with the fingers of both hands, as though he were preparing for a difficult bottom deal.

"I sat on his jury," Clint said. "I seen him buried."

Mike Moriarty, a massive, rugged-looking man who was getting gray over the ears and heavy around the belt, unconsciously rubbed his right wrist, where a bullet from the gun of Brimstone Bill Thatcher had once gone through. He whispered, "I held the timber while they blocked 'er up for his scaffold."

Mark Purdy was the first to come to his senses. He did the logical thing: brought up the bottle from the floor by his rocker, and laughed.

"I'm damned," he said, "if he didn't fool me for a minute! I'd swear that was the old hooligan who tried to buck us twelve years ago. Of course it can't be." He spoke with a solid, weren't-we-the-fools-boys conviction to which his eyes gave the lie.

They drank out of the bottle, but Ed Clint was watching the big-shouldered man in the red checkered shirt dismount before his saloon. He saw the bed-roll tied behind the cantle and the guitar slung across the man's back. "Look," he said.

The stranger crossed the boardwalk with a barely noticeable limp. It caused him to walk with his right shoulder just a bit lower than his left. But a lot of men who lived by their guns had that habit. Not only Brimstone Bill.

"I guess," said Clint, "I'll go see how the wheel's running."

He rose, a slender, handsome man of forty, thin-featured, with silver-white hair and a clipped white mustache. He had the appearance of a man you would instinctively call "Honest Ed", unless you had sat in at one of his games.

"I'll go along and have a beer," Mike Moriarty told him.

Mark Purdy said nothing, but when they departed he was beside them. In a way, it was like three men afraid to be alone in the dark, in dangerous country.

THEY went into the cool gloom of the long, low adobe building. There was a good crowd at the bar and among the tables where the gambling went on. Clint's girls had not shown up yet; they weren't on till the day-shift came off at three from the mines.

The mysterious black-haired stranger stood belly-up at the bar, by himself. Standing just inside the doorway, Mark Purdy inspected him narrowly. Yes, the tokens were all there. Black, curly hair and blue eyes, the perpetual

dark beard-stubble, a nose that was a little flat as though it had been broken at some time. The fanciest-stitched red boots in New Mexico. A charro vest, red and green and with a silver-embroidered rooster on the back. And—the thing that could not have been duplicated—a certain go-to-hell, reckless look on his face; a quick, hard vigilance that broke without warning into a grin.

Brimstone Bill had been watching them in the back-bar. He saluted the trio with a wave of his hand. "Howdy, boys," he said. "Long time no see."

Mark Purdy gave the others a glance. He ordered a round of bourbon for them all. Then he said, looking very hard into the other man's eyes, "I reckon you've got the advantage of us, stranger."

"If I have," said the man, "it's shore the first time. The name's Thatcher—Bill Thatcher. You're Mark Purdy."

Purdy treated it the only way he could—as a joke. He winked at the others. Don't look now, Brimstone—" he said—"but you're dead! Ha-ha!"

"So they tell me." Brimstone Bill regarded the promoter with a steady and distasteful gaze, noting the pouches under Purdy's eyes and the streaking of gray in the rusty-black fullness of his beard; the eyes that were cold and blue as glacial ice. Purdy still wore expensive pin-stripe city suits and tucked the trousers into conservative black boots. And the knees of his pants were still baggy, as though he spent too much time on his knees, worshipping gold and power.

Purdy stirred, resentment marching across his heavy brow. "This, of course, is a joke," he said. "Maybe you'd care to explain it, before you carry it too far."

Brimstone Bill hitched up his gunbelt, heavy with the two old cedar-handled Peacemakers. "I'm going to carry it all the way," he said.

Mike Moriarty looked scornful. "How far is that?" he inquired. He was something of a gunman himself, but he wore his gun out of sight, under his coat. Ed Clint watched Thatcher like a hawk, studying him, trying not to believe.

"Why," said Brimstone Bill, "I've come back to wreck this new shenanigan of yours. You remember, don't you, that I said I would? That was just before you hung me."

"Before we laugh," Mark Purdy snapped, "are you supposed to be a ghost, a reincarnation, or what?"

"I'm a ghost," Brimstone Bill said. "Like any self-respecting corpse, I'd rather lie in my grave and quietly rot, but you won't let me." He glared at them. "Can't you let this poor damned town alone? Twelve years ago you ruined all its cowmen by getting them to invest in a railroad you never intended to build. You hung me for killing too many of your gunhands. And now that the hard luck boys have found some low-grade silver in the hills, you've got to knock them down again and take their mines."

"And what," Ed Clint asked, "do you intend to do about it?"

"Lots of things," said the outlaw. "Mainly, I'm going to kill all three of you."

MARK PURDY threw his drink across the room. Above the beard his face was purple. "If you want to listen to the maunderings of this madman," he roared at his companions, "you're welcome to. I'm going out and get some fresh air." As he turned, he winked at Mike Moriarty.

Brimstone Bill went back to his glass, as though he had forgotten them. Mike Moriarty spoke to a man sitting in a poker game, then went outside. All three were shaken, and as they stood aside from the batwing doors to wait, no word was spoken.

Brimstone Bill Thatcher had not lived by his wits for nothing. He had observed the by-play between Moriarity and the halfbreed deputy near the door, obviously the bouncer. While he drank, he watched the man move silently, so that the door, with its confusing pattern of black and glaring white, was behind him. The gunman was thin and copper-skinned, gaunt and hard of eye.

Suddenly he shouted, "Get 'em up, Thatcher! You're under arrest!"

He was already pulling his gun, and Brimstone Bill recognized the old "deputy" game—startle the victim, than shoot him as he "attempted to resist."

The muddled noises of the Gateway to Hell ended like muted strings. Miners and cowboys sought the comfort of the floor, of the juniper bar.

Brimstone Bill Thatcher did not appear to move, but there was a roar and a flash of powder from where he stood, and the breed reeled back into the doors. He pulled his gun and stumbled forward. He fired once, the bullet ricocheting off the hard dirt floor. Brimstone Bill's right hand still rested on the bar, holding his drink, but his left hand, held close to his body, fired a second shot from the forty-five. The deputy's knees bent; he lay crookedly across the floor.

Standing outside, Mark Purdy and his companions heard the swift, crashing play of guns. Afterward, Ed Clint sponged off his brow and loosened his black string tie. "Well, that's that," he breathed.

Mark Purdy took a long breath into his capacious chest, standing erect and smiling lightly. "I'm almost sorry," he said. "I'd like to of known just who in hell he was."

Brimstone Bill Thatcher came out of the

saloon just then. He said, "Stick around, neighbors. Maybe you'll find out," and he walked up the street.

Marshal Hank Bowie came piling out of his office, scattergun under his arm, just as Thatcher reached the Muleshoe Corral. The outlaw waited in the hot yellow glare of the July sunlight, the warm animal odors of the corral about him, the buzz of flies inside the stable a somnolent drone. He watched the stocky, red-faced officer come on, scowling.

Seeing that Bowie was about to pass, Brimstone Bill said, "Hold on, Marshal. Here's your man. I had to shoot your saloon deputy a minute ago."

Startled, Marshal Bowie halted. He started to raise his shotgun. When he saw the face of the outlaw, when he looked deep and searchingly into the Irish-blue eyes, he let the gun fall to the sidewalk. His mouth went loose.

"Bill," he said. "They made me do it. It was my official duty. I never wanted to hang a good man like you. Kill me if you want to, Bill, but—for God's sake don't stare at me like that!"

Brimstone Bill Thatcher watched the man's drink-mottled cheeks quiver. "All right, Hank," he said. "Let's go back to your office."

IN THE small building that held four cells and a tiny office, Marshall Hank Bowie took a bottle of Scotch out of his desk and poured a good jolt into a dusty tumbler. On the whitewashed mud walls of the cool little room were displayed mementos of his fifteen years as law officer—a dead man's silver spurs and a snake-skin belt; a road-agent's branding iron; a red-and-black *serape* once worn by a Mexican stage-robber.

But the marshal did not show any comfort in these close and familiar things: it was apparent that he felt shut in with a dead man. He employed the same tack Purdy had taken to stiffen his spine: he tried to make a joke out of it. He extended the glass to Brimstone Bill.

"Have a drink, Bill?" he asked. "Or—ha-ha!—don't ghosts use spirits?"

Brimstone Bill gave him a weary smile. "I only drink beer," he said. He sat on the pole-and-rawhide chair, lightly strumming the guitar.

Marshal Bowie said, "Yeah, that's right. Well, here's health—or happy haunting, I should say!"

After the drink his color became a little better. He linked his fingers and leaned across the desk. "Bill," he said, "let's lay our cards on the table. Are you, or aren't you?"

Brimstone Bill Thatcher made the guitar talk, softly and mournfully, his thumb stroking the strings gently. You've got the death certificate on me," he said.

Bowie frowned. "And yet there's somethin'—" He shook his head. "It's one o' them things you can't explain. Something ain't quite right about you. You look like him, you've got his mannerisms—even his guitar—and yet it's like puttin' your hand in a fire and finding out it ain't hot: there's something lacking."

He gave the outlaw a sudden searching look. "You had a boy down South somewhere, didn't you?"

Thatcher's broad forehead darkened. He laid the guitar suddenly aside. "If I did," he snapped, "I've forgotten the ungrateful whelp. Now I'll ask some questions. How did Purdy's crowd get back in Gunsight?"

"By usin' the same whip that broke the town last time," said the marshal. "Twelve years ago they broke all the cattlemen and merchants—and me—by selling bogus stock. God knew we needed a railroad, and we not only bought their stock but granted them alternate sections and ten acres on the edge of town for a station and yard. Well, the company kept stalling on its promises, but they went to the trouble of claiming all their grants, which killed off plenty of men because they didn't have a railhead to compensate for their losses."

Hank Bowie shrugged. "I don't know why I should be telling all this to you. You were right in the middle of it. Your Drag Eight iron went under first, and they forced you to the owlhoot for killing three men when you were evicted. Even though your pardner was killed in the ruckus. You made life pretty hectic for them until they finally trapped you. About a year after I—after I hung you—drought hit us. The range burnt up. They'd milked the country dry by over-stocking, anyway. So they sold land back to us at good prices, and it looked like we'd paid our way out of the mess at last."

"Then how in the devil did they get back in?"

Bowie laid his hands flat on the table. "Foss Glenn found silver right outside of town last year. Mark Purdy was down here in a month's time. In a few weeks we were all served with damage suits. Seems the stock we bought in the Silver City and Denver was mutual stock; we owned shares in the company and were responsible for its lawsuits!

"Purdy was finally shoving his railroad through; only it's just a forty-mile spur of a big road. He went across every spring and burnt up every range he could on the way down. The cattlemen he hurt sued us; and we stand the gaff! Purdy made settlements out of court and now he's got liens on all our holdings for repayment. And he's already taken

over the mines on the west slope. He's runnin' 'em night and day."

Brimstone Bill did not appear surprised. "'Pears to me like nobody in this town knows how to fight for his rights. Foss Glenn still around?"

Bowie smiled crookedly. "Yes and no. He's liable to be out pretty soon. Foss shot off his mouth to Purdy. Purdy got a Federal injunction."

Thatcher arose. He rubbed the rough black stubble of his chin. "I guess I'll look him up," he said. "Reckon he's changed a lot since I was around."

"What are you aiming to do, Bill?" Marshal Hank Bowie appeared concerned. "Nothing rough," said Brimstone Bill. "Anything that happens out of line will be on the railroad crowd's head. I'm just going to take over my ranch and work some cattle."

Bowie shook his head. "That's Purdy's private estate now. He keeps a crew of cowpunchers out there to look picturesque for his Eastern friends when he brings 'em out for the summer holidays."

"Maybe they won't look so picturesque with holes in their heads," the outlaw said.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dead Man's Round-Up

HE RODE up the trail to the mines. From above, Gunsight had an appearance of peace, the river flashing like a twist of silver ribbon through the town—crossing Market Street in the center of the business section, threading the residential section at the foot of the hill, shaded with poplar and oak. North of town stood the concentrate mill, a sheet-metal building on a stony red slope.

He rode past the lanky wooden structure of a grizzly, threading through the high-walled ore wagons standing below to take their loads. Everywhere he saw men stop their work in mid-stroke to stare. He took a little side-trail that angled up, as though he had been this way many times before.

From a tangle of sumac ahead of him stepped a large-bellied man in bib overalls, muddy hip-boots turned down to his knees, a carbine in his hands. One cheek was pouched with tobacco. He spat in the path.

"Right thar will do, friend," he said. "You was goin' in the right direction afore you took this trail."

Bill Thatcher swung down, to stand with his right hand on the horn of his saddle. His rough, homely features began to smile. "It's me, Foss," he said. "Brimstone Bill Thatcher."

He was watching Foss Glenn's deep-seamed face closely. Glenn had the shaggiest of eyebrows, a nose endowed by liquor with a lusty color, a jaw that was heavy and broad. He was in his fifties, a hearty, solid-looking man.

"You may be Bill Thatcher," he said, "but you ain't Brimstone Bill. There never will be another. Come on up."

Bill tethered his steeldust before a rude adobe cabin. On the slope above were a couple of mine portals and a bluish-gray cone of rubble. In his high-heeled red Mexican boots he picked his way carefully up the path. At the door, the miner put on a pair of thick spectacles and searched the other man's face closely. "Yes, sir," he said. "You're your daddy's son, all right. By golly, you could have fooled me!" Then he said soberly, "I hope the resemblance ain't only skin deep."

"Sometimes I wish it was," said Bill Thatcher. "Once you get to glory-holin', you can't stop. Once you get a rep for killing, they won't leave you alone. I've got both habits."

They went inside, Foss Glenn setting out a chair for the younger man. "When'd you get my letter?" he asked.

"Three weeks ago. I was in Chihuahua. I've been sort of hopin' all along that things would quiet down and I wouldn't have to come up. When I heard you were bein' tossed out, I knew it was the same old story again. This is right where Dad came in, isn't it? Same story, same set o' snakes. Only I hope I get a little more accomplished."

The miner said quietly. "You will, Billy—you will! The night before he swung, your father said to me, 'Tell him to lay off the likker, Foss. If it hadn't of been for that, I wouldn't be where I am now. But I had to get likkered up and ride through the Gateway to Hell, gunning 'em right and left. And I wouldn't have broke up with Mary if I could have let it alone.' He told me all about you, how much you looked like 'im."

"Nobody in town knew he had a son, did they?"

"Not for sure. Some suspected those summer buyin' trips of his was to visit somebody. Bill thought you'd want to lock horns with his murderers, sometime, and just in case it worked out that you got handy with a gun like he was, he had me keep you posted all these years. From the looks of you, I reckon you can shoot those Peacemakers right well."

"Not shooting them is the tricky part," Bill Thatcher said. He sat looking out into the sun-splashed yard, many thoughts and emotions crowding through him. Yes, he could handle a sixgun. You learned that early, when you found yourself on your own at fourteen. Three years ago he'd killed a man; he was tried and acquitted. Killing wasn't Bill Thatcher's born trade. He had never quite got over the effect of taking a man's life, even in Mexico, where he had worked on the Tehuan-

tepec railroad and punched cattle. He hadn't come back because he was afraid to come back—afraid he would be forced into the same life into which circumstances—and alcohol—had plunged his father.

But he had been dealt into this game twelve years ago, and when Foss Glenn's monthly news-letter came, he knew it was his time. On Foss' suggestion he had donned all his father's effects, the things Foss had sent him after the hanging. If he could get away with it, the psychological effect would be good.

Bill Thatcher knew something else, too: it would be kill or cure for him. Either he would come out of this war dead, or he would lay the spectre of outlawry once and for all.

FOSS GLENN jumped up and went to a window. "Somebody comin'," he said. He had his carbine at his shoulder and he was squinting hard, trying to recognize the riders on the trail. Old age hadn't helped his vision any. "Who is it, Bill?" he asked.

At the door, Bill Thatcher frowned. "Fella and a girl," he said. "The man's about thirty—good-lookin' and a hefty one. Hacker boots; prob'ly a miner."

"The girl?"

"Maybe twenty. Pretty as a spotted pup under a red wagon. Dark hair. And she's stacked up right nice." He chuckled. "I reckon I'd swap places with that feller any time."

Foss laughed. "Excuse a father's pride," he said. "I knew it was Abby when you said there was a girl. I just wanted to know how she looked to the unprejudiced eye. The man is Matt Gower, head of the Miners' Pool."

Bill Thatcher colored. He changed the subject. "What's the Miners' Pool do? Have teas? I can't see where it's done much for Gunsight."

Lighting his pipe, Foss grunted. "Matt's a great one for goin' slow and legal."

Bill's lower lip went out just a little. Things are liable to go fast and unlegal from now on," he remarked. And suddenly he thought: *Hell's fire! Jealous over a girl you haven't even met yet!* But some primitive wariness caused him to say, "If Gower doesn't know about me yet, let's keep it that way."

"Sure," Foss Glenn said. "In Gunsight you don't let your right hand know what your left hand's doin'. Abby knows, of course. But she can keep her mouth shut."

The man and girl left their horses in the tiny brush corral behind the cabin and came inside. Matt Gower was a brown-eyed, serious-looking man with a good width of shoulder and large, work-hardened hands. There was humor in the set of his lips, warmth in his eyes.

"This is Bill Thatcher, Matt," Foss Glenn said. "Bill, shake hands with Matt Gower."

ACROSS their cautiously gripped hands the men regarded each other closely. Bill resented the man's well-turned-out look because it made him feel shoddy and unshaven—which he was—and before anything so pretty as Abby Glenn he preferred to feel debonair.

Gower frowned. "I heard about you down in town," he said. "You killed Obie Aiken. And you claim to be the ghost of Brimstone Bill. What's the game, friend?"

Foss cleared his throat. "That's a tetchy subject with Bill," he remarked. "Ghosts don't like people lookin' slanchwise at 'em. Let's just get resigned to the fact that he's a sperrit, and say no more. Bill's workin' with us—right where he left off before."

A hand touched Bill's stubbled cheek lightly, and he started. Abby Glenn had come around behind him and placed her fingers on his cheek.

"Excuse me," she said, smiling. "I always wanted to know what a ghost feels like. At least I know what an unshaven one feels like now."

Bill Thatcher scowled and lit a brown-paper Mexican cigarette. He was uncomfortably conscious of Abby's eyes on him—gray-blue eyes that were intimate and noticing. She didn't stand higher than his ear, but she carried herself like a queen—straight-limbed and proud-breasted.

"What's new from town?" Foss asked Gower.

Gower sat down at the table and began to drum on the uneven pine top with his fingers. "Bad," he said. "You've got to vacate by sundown."

Foss snorted. "What do you mean, I've got to vacate?"

Matt Gower laid a telegram on the table. "We lost our cease and desist suit," he said. "The judge up at Santa Fé ruled their injunction was in order. You'll have to move out, Foss. You can come over with me till we appeal it."

The miner swore, took a hitch in his belt. "Like hell!" he said.

Gower gave him a hard, level look. "Do you want to ruin the defense I've been building up for a year?" he demanded. "We're trying to stay on the right side of the law to fight them. One move like this will destroy our whole case."

"What are you mining?" Bill Thatcher asked. "Courts or claims?"

"Your method of resistance has been tried," Gower snapped. "It didn't work." He stood up, putting on his curl-brimmed Stetson. "I can't promise you any help from the Pool if you resort to force," he told Glenn. "What's it going to be?"

Abby Glenn held her father's arm. "Don't let your temper lead you into anything foolish,

Dad," she told him. "You know how much chance we'd have with Mike Moriarty's gun-deputies. You'd be one against a dozen."

"Two," amended Bill. "Two grizzly bears against twelve foxes. The odds are ours, Foss."

Foss smiled. He slapped Bill on the back. "I was forgettin'," he said. "That's how she'll be, Matt. Tell the boys that anybody that wants to snap a few caps can drop over any time before dark. After that they'd better come with a lantern."

Matt Gower shook hands with him, unsmiling. "I'm sorry you're doing this, Foss. We'll have to outlaw you from the Pool if there's any trouble. Good luck, anyway."

NIGHT comes to the mountain country like a blanket dropped over a fire. At six o'clock the broken barricades of the Gallinas blocked off the sun; by another half-hour it was almost full dark, and the son of Brimstone Bill finished picking out one of those interminable, sad Mexican songs and made ready to leave the cabin. He had been singing, very softly, *The Dove,* and the spell of it lingered in the darkening room.

Abby Glenn watched him check the loads of his gun and peer long and steadily into the manzanita. "I suppose you know," she said, "that you'll probably get yourself shot, or hanged—again."

Bill's rough-cut features were noncommittal.

"And aside from that," Abby pursued, "you'll spoil any chance of a court victory we may have."

"Don't talk to me about the law," said Bill. "The law is only something they throw at me in court when I've been naughty."

Abby stood there, perplexed and angry, the gold of the lamp stirring in her hair and her lips petulant. It was too much for a man who hadn't seen more than a dozen white girls in three years. He caught her to him with one arm and kissed her on the mouth. Abby jumped back with a gasp and slapped him.

Bill grinned and rubbed his cheek. "Well, it was worth it," he told her.

Foss shook his head. "Whisky, politics and women," he grunted. "Three things your father was always preachin' against. Think about it. What are you fixin' to do?"

"We can't stand them off without some kind of a plan," Bill Thatcher said. "If they come before I get back, keep throwing nuts and bolts into the brush from your twelve-gauge. I'll be along in less than an hour."

"Hadn't I better get Abby out?"

"I don't look for much trouble," Bill said, looking at the girl. "Leave it up to her."

Abby Glenn took a .30-30 saddle gun from a wall bracket and sat down beside a window which gave on the rear. "You and your big ideas," she said. "I'm too young to die." But she stuck out her lower lip and jacked a shell into the gun-breach.

"Too young and too purty," Bill said.

There remained enough light for him to saddle and pick out a cow-trail striking down through the brush. He rode down to Gunsight, his attitude of lightheartedness gone. Foss Glenn would have to have a daughter. He had enough trouble without falling in love with somebody else's girl. Bill wished she were forty years old, with a mustache.

THE GATEWAY TO HELL beckoned with many lights and many sounds, the tinkle of glassware and the high laughter of Ed Clint's girls. It was the only two-story building in town. Bill left his horse in the bosque below the bridge south of town and approached the saloon by the rear. He saw what he had expected—a huddle of saddled horses racked behind the place. Against the light adobe wall he discerned an outside stairway that climbed to the second story. Green-blinded windows intrigued him.

He opened his Barlow and went through the horses, softly whistling to soothe them. Each latigo he sliced to within a quarter of an inch through. They were fourteen useless cow-ponies when he stepped carefully to the stairway and went upstairs.

The door was unlocked and he went into an unlighted room that reeked with powder and perfume. He could make out, like gray wraiths, the gowns that hung along the walls of the dressing room. Bill went into the corridor. He had silenced his spur rowels with matchsticks and he now trod softly down the hall, listening at each closed door. He knew, by the raised voices, when he had gained the right one.

Mark Purdy sounded angry. "I don't care if he's swamp-mist or blood and bone—he's going! That means you, Mike. I haven't paid for your blondes and brandy fifteen years to have you crawfish when I need you."

Mike Moriarty's sullen, deep voice growled, "What am I supposed to do? Gun him because he looks like Brimstone Bill Thatcher? If he is Thatcher, he's already been hung once and we can't hang him again for the same crime. And if he isn't, we haven't got anything on him."

"That's what you're paid to figure out. I don't ask you to do it legally—just do it. I've got the boys all primed up for riding Glenn out on a rail tonight. I figure Thatcher will be with him. If he is, our troubles are over. The crime will be aidin' and abettin'. If he isn't, you've got till tomorrow night to bring me his ears."

Bill heard Ed Clint murmur, "If you don't, Mike—I will."

Mike Moriarty sounded driven, desperate. "You two can talk big. You don't have to tangle with this guitar-playin' gunslinger. You seen what he did to Aiken. Aiken was no Salvation Army laddy. I'll get him, boss, just don't crowd me. I got to figure—"

There was the scrape of a chair. Ed Clint said in his quiet, meaningful way, "I'm going to send the boys out now, Mike. How about a little bonus if he brings those ears tonight, Mark?"

Bill Thatcher did not wait to hear more. He was slipping down the hall and into the dressing room again. Only when he was inside did he realize that a lamp was burning in the room. And then it was too late.

Three girls in fluffy underthings were screaming at him and making threatening gestures with brushes and clothes-hangers. Up the hall the door came open and Mike Moriarty shouted, "What's the matter, Floss?"

BILL THATCHER, realizing he had blundered into the wrong room, hastily backed out. One of the girls, an ample-bosomed redhead, screeched after him.

"Keep out of here, you cheap cow-town Romeo! You can see all you're s'posed to see downstairs!"

Bill was reaching for the right knob when Moriarty and Ed Clint stepped into the hall. The lamplight from within the office fell over Clint's silver-white hair and dark skin. Clint already had his gun in his hand, and he threw down on Thatcher with a tight, scared look on his face. The sound of the shot rolled, filling the hall, and the bullet crashed through a window beyond Bill.

Unruffled, Bill sent a shot into the wall ahead of the saloonkeeper, so that the slug wailed off the adobe and passed within inches of Clint's body. It had the effect of driving him and Moriarty to the floor, and Bill went through the dressing room on a run.

On the landing, he halted and stepped back as far as he could into the shadows. He heard them running. When the lean shape of Ed Clint came through the portal, Bill let him have it across the head with his gun-barrel. He gave Clint a shove and watched him bump down the stairs.

Mike Moriarty was next. Bill struck him almost gently. With a hand in his collar he supported him, dragging him back and shoving the gun into his spine. Moriarty began to struggle, dazed and frightened.

"Easy does it," Bill said. "You can go for a walk with me or you can die right here with a slug in your back."

The ponderous gunman quieted. Bill let thirty seconds pass, and when Mark Purdy did not appear he assumed he had gone down the inside stairway to the saloon, to arouse the crowd. He hurried Moriarty down the stairway, stepping over Ed Clint halfway down. Within the saloon voices were raised to a shouting pitch, and the thump of feet was toward the rear door.

Bill choused the stumbling man across the open space to the wolf-willow growth along the creek. He forced Moriarty to his belly in the grass, deep in the tangled bosque, and he remained on his knees beside him, watching the deputies funnel out the back of the Gateway to Hell. There was much running about and shouting back and forth and peering into alleys and sheds. Then Mark Purdy bawled:

"Where's Ed and Mike?"

No one could tell him; but presently Ed Clint was found on the stairway, still out cold. They began to sense that the ghost of Brimstone Bill was having another of his macabre little hoorawin's. Bill Thatcher saw that the men hung together a little closer. Mark Purdy tried to stamp out this lack of guts which was sapping the fight-spirit of his men.

"He's taken Mike back to the mine!" he shouted. "Hit the saddle and stop him. Fifty bucks apiece if you bring Thatcher back at the end of a rope!"

The fire flared again. Men were flipping the reins of their ponies from the rack and springing to the saddle . . . and falling back with startled curses when the cinches gave way. There were ten of them down all at once—all trying to crawl out from under the heavy stock saddles and the chopping hoofs of their ponies. Horses began to rear and a couple went loping up the river into the night.

AFTER that even the railroad czar knew the first round had gone to Brimstone Bill. No one had seen him except Ed Clint, and Ed was in no condition to identify the night-rider. Bill Thatcher kept the gun shoved in Mike Moriarty's spine while the crowd gradually filtered back into the barroom.

Then he said, "Get up, Mike."

Moriarty arose and regarded him with his head lowered, like a shaggy old graze bull driven past his endurance, his jaw hanging and his big, flaccid belly rising and falling. "This is no way to kill a man," he said. "You allus gave a man a chance before, Bill."

"Don't worry, Mike. I'm not going to kill you. I just want you to know I mean business. When I kill you, it will be right out on Market Street, with a hundred men to watch." He made an impulsive gesture with his gun. "Take off your boots and britches, Mike."

Moriarty started. "What the hell?" he said.

Bill Thatcher jammed the gun into his belly. "Take 'em off!"

Moriarty growled and pulled off his boots and trousers. At Bill's command, he waded into the stream, groaning as the sharp pebbles

and icy water bit his soft flesh. "Now walk downstream," said Bill. "I left my pony down by the bridge. I'm just taking you along so I won't have to walk all by myself."

They moved along, Bill on the bank, Mike Moriarty stumbling, swearing, half-crying with pain. "I remember," Bill said, "how it was when you captured me in the Gateway to Hell, after my guns went empty. You dragged me from one end of town to the other with a rope. A man don't forget such things, even in the grave."

Moriarty said, "That was Mark's idea. I'm like you, Bill—square."

"And then I remember the night you brought me a T-bone steak," Bill said. "I was to hang the next morning. I thought maybe you had a heart, at that. But as soon as I'd taken one bite I knew you'd had it hangin' in the sun for the flies to enjoy for a week before you fed it to me. That was so I'd have a belly-ache all night before I hung."

"Clint," said Moriarty, groaning as he went to his knees and stumbled up again. "Clint thought of that."

"Who thought of your testimony in court?" Bill Thatcher snapped. "You swore on the Book that you saw me kill three cattlemen in the saloon, men I had nothing agin'. That was what hurt. People believing that. You didn't want me to be a martyr, did you? If you'd let that happen, I might have been more valuable dead than alive."

Moriarty stopped wading. His whisky-shot features turned pathetic with pain and desperation. "So help me! he said. "I wouldn't o' said a word—"

Bill snapped: "Shut up! I'm sick of your buck-passing. Sick of the smell of you, you second-hand gunslinger. Here's what I brought you out to tell you: All three of you are going to die. You and Clint by a bullet; Mark Purdy by the rope. Tell 'em that, Mike. And think about it at night, when it's black as the inside of a cow's stomach and you don't know whether that was a mouse you heard or Brimstone Bill. *'Noches, amigo!* I'll see you in hell!"

Mike Moriarty heard him whistling the sad little Mexican tune a few minutes later as he rode away. It made him think of death, and a heaviness grew upon the gunman's heart, a sadness and a great loneliness, as though someone very close to him were going to die. And no one was so close to the heart of Mike Moriarty as Mike himself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Ranch of the Damned

BILL and Foss stood watches all night, but the mine was left alone. At breakfast Foss said, "Old Mark ain't going to laugh about this. It's the first time in years he's said he was going to do a thing, and didn't."

"It won't be the last," Bill promised him grimly.

Abby had a way of resting her chin on her linked fingers and looking at him with mock admiration that both angered and confused Bill. She was doing it now, her plate set aside.

"You've got them on the run, haven't you, Bill?" she said.

"I ain't losing any ground," Bill Thatcher admitted.

"And what comes next?"

Bill went and sat on the cot. He put his guitar on his lap and frowned at the red, varnished wood while he turned the strings slowly.

"Next," he said, "I'm going to the ranch. Dad told me in that last letter that he was leaving me plenty of written evidence to convict Mark Purdy of murder. I took it that his pardner, Johnny Underwood, wrote up an accusation before he died. Dad said he'd leave the evidence where I'd sure stumble over it, and nobody else ever would. He knew they'd override it if he sprang it in the trial, and he was afraid to send it through the mail. I reckon it's out at the ranch."

"Do you know the way?" Abby asked solemnly.

Bill looked at her. "Why—no," he said.

"Matt's interested in a claim over that way," the girl said. "I was going to ride over with him today to look at it, so we might as well all go over to the Drag Eight while we're at it."

For a minute Bill had thought romance was being laid in his lap. He drew his thumb sharply across the strings and let the instrument lie there humming sullenly. "All right," he said. "I'll saddle the horses."

Matt Gower came up the trail in a few minutes. He sat his horse, watching Bill saddle Abby's pony, big and broad-shouldered and frowning. "They had quite a ruckus down at the Gateway last night," he remarked after a moment.

Bill said, "So?"

Gower's mouth turned in a smile that was partly contempt. "Of course you'd know nothing about it," he said. "Only I heard that you slugged Ed Clint, made Mike Moriarty cut his feet to ribbons in the creek, and threatened the Big Three. That's good going, Bill—if you can keep it up without being killed."

"Time it was tried," Bill grunted.

Abby came out and explained their plans. Gower said, "Fine!" and helped her into the saddle. Bill went in the cabin and slung his guitar over his back: he figured he'd have plenty of time by himself to kill this trip.

THEY climbed the mountain through scattered stands of piñon and oak, reaching the divide in an hour, high above the mines. Bill Thatcher felt something big and warm stir in him as he looked down on the long crescent-shaped sweep of Cow Creek Valley, east of them. Little emerald meadows dotted the floor of the valley, and the slopes of the hills hemming it in. At the edge of one of those meadows stood his father's cabin. Forty sections of that cowman's heaven belonged to the Drag Eight.

Peace was what Bill Thatcher wanted, and there was peace here—but he would have to fight for it. All Bill hoped was that he had something left when he got through fighting.

Gower pulled rein at a fork in the trail. "I'm going over to Copper Creek," he said. "It won't take me an hour. I'll meet you at the cabin." And he said to Bill, "What are you going to do when Purdy's men throw down on you?"

Bill grinned. "What you worrying about? Fifteen of 'em threw down on me last night and nobody got hurt. You'd think they were friends of yours."

Gower rode away. Abby said, as they rode on, "How about some music, Bill? That little Mexican song you were singing last night."

Bill unslung the guitar, pleased. He had one bulge on Matt Gower, anyway. If only he didn't have a jaw like an anvil and manners like a bull buffalo, he might have a chance. He started singing.

*"Cuando salí de la Habana, válgame Dios! Nadie me ha vista salir—"*

He broke off, frowning. Something was wrong. The words were there, but the music came reluctantly. He tried another—"Pajario." It went better. Abby interrupted him.

"I liked the sad one better. Why did you stop singing it?"

Bill slung the instrument across his back again. "I don't know," he said. "I can't sing the sad ones when I'm with you. Though God knows all the sad ones were inspired by some woman."

After that they rode without talking. They came onto the floor of the valley and followed Cow Creek's meanderings for a half-hour. On the edge of a pear-shaped meadow edged with lodgepole pine, Abby Glenn stopped. "That's it," she said.

Bill's eyes found the small flat-roofed cabin at the narrow end of the meadow. There were two small barns and a string of pole corrals, a stone springhouse and a smithy. When he thought of his father building all this, running cattle instead of killing men, he realized suddenly there was another side to him that he had seldom thought of. Given a chance, that side could have developed and become something fine and strong. But Mark Purdy, who specialized in warping lives, had put his heel on all that.

"I don't see anybody," Bill said, "but you'd better wait here. I'll quarter around and try to get in."

He reached a point a hundred yards from the cabin without being challenged. The corral was empty and he decided the crew must be out. He left his horse there and started across the clearing, approaching the cabin from the front. He walked stiffly on his high Mexican heels, Chihuahua spurs chiming. Just short of the door he was arrested by a flash of movement in the doorway.

A woman's voice said, "You'd better not come any closer, honey. This thing might go off and blow you all apart."

BILL stared at the girl who stood lounging against the jamb. She was pretty, in a flimsy way: red-headed, with very fair skin and very red lips. She had a full-blown figure, and her gown set it off. She had a shotgun in her hands, which she handled awkwardly, but she seemed to know where the trigger was.

Suddenly Bill knew her: the girl, Floss, into whose dressing room he had stumbled! He smiled at her and began to roll a cigarette.

"So you've taken up ranching?" he said. "Well, you're sure the type. You fit in here just like a humming-bird fits a crow's-nest. What's the joke, Floss?"

Floss' red mouth smiled. "Well, well!" she said. "If it isn't the keyhole Romeo."

"Who did you think it was?" Billy asked. "Or do you greet all your friends with a shotgun?"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"Whoever I thought it was, you just came out here for the ride back, handsome. You can start walking any time."

Bill went towards her. "I thought I'd look around some," he told her. "You see, I own the place. Did Purdy think I'd be afraid to tackle a woman?"

Floss came upright, menacing him with the gun. Her flip prettiness was gone and there was malignance in her green eyes. "I don't know what you want here," she said, "but you aren't coming in. Now, get out."

Bill stopped. She had him cold. He thought of the papers he had come looking for, and he was determined not to leave the cabin unsearched. "Listen," he said. "There's no reason we can't make a deal. All I want is to look around for something I left here twelve years ago. After that I'll go. I'm not ready to take over yet anyway."

Floss opened her mouth to say something, but at that instant a rope settled over her buxom shoulders and she was yanked rudely off balance. The gun clattered to the floor, and Floss went down screaming. Bill had his gun out and was running for the cabin, wondering who had tossed the rope.

He saw Abby crawling through the rear window with a piggin' string in her teeth, and he laughed as she rolled the bar-girl over on her face and caught her white arms behind her. Abby made a regular calf-tie—both hands with one foot drawn up and tied with them. Floss was screaming, threatening and swearing.

When she used Bill's name, Abby glanced at him. "Friend of yours?"

Bill flushed. "Well—an acquaintance. How did you get in here?"

"Just came around by the horse-trap. I thought you'd probably blunder right in."

She'd do as a pardner, Bill Thatcher thought, but he didn't let his conviction show on his face. He began to poke about the one-room cabin, testing the fireplace bricks, tapping the walls, the floor. The adobe was everywhere as solid as an oak log. There wasn't a spot six inches square where anything could have been hidden. He sat down and rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully.

*"Where you'll stumble over it and nobody else ever will . . ."*

What could Brimstone Bill have meant but in his old cabin? And yet, since he'd written the letter in jail, how could he have got out here to hide it?

FLOSS had subsided into sobbing. Bill glanced at her, and he had a small wonder in his head about why she had come out here in the first place. Maybe Purdy banked on his chivalry to make him leave the cabin alone if a woman were guarding it. Maybe—

Bill was looking at a canvas telescope bag in the corner. On the side of it was an old baggage tag. He went over and inspected it. It was made out to Michael Moriarty. Suddenly Bill wanted to laugh, and yet it was kind of pitiful.

"So I threw the scare into old Mike!" he said. "And you thought you'd go along, just for luck. Well, you two are smart. Only Mike won't leave Gunsight except in a baggage car, in a big wooden box. When was he going to meet you?"

Floss showed him her teeth. "You—damn'—ghoul!" she said.

Bill Thatcher smiled ruefully at Abby. "A lot of people don't understand me," he said. "Maybe we'd better be going."

Abby's eyes were cool, and she gave him only a flick of a glance. She said, "Maybe we had," and flipped the piggin' string from the dance-hall girl's wrists.

Bill took the shotgun, as a precaution. Floss was standing there rubbing her wrists when they disappeared into the trees.

They came to a side trail and Abby pulled up. "Can you find your way back all right?"

Bill said, "Why, sure. But—"

"Then I'll ride over and meet Matt. Perhaps you'd like to go back and apologize to that girl for my blundering in. Probably you could have handled things fine if I hadn't come along."

She was gone at a lope, and Bill sat there until the trail dust had settled, and still he could not understand it. A girl like that even looking twice at the son of Brimstone Bill Thatcher! Slowly he rode on. Maybe he could have followed up the lead, if the pattern hadn't already been cut out before he ever hit this range. But dead-end canyons seemed to be a specialty of the Thatcher clan. . . .

Foss Glenn had news when he returned.

Glenn was sitting on the stoop when he rode up, shirtless, his big stomach lapping over his belt under the long-handled underwear. His rifle stood against the wall beside him.

"They're closin' in, Billy," he said. "One of the boys brought word to Matt that Purdy has served foreclosure notices on every miner in this hill. He takes over tomorrow night, if we let 'im."

"Odds are about even, aren't they?" Bill demanded.

Foss knocked the smoking heel out of his pipe. "If Matt lets 'em fight. He preaches so much go-easy talk that sometimes I wonder about his guts."

"You can stop wondering," Bill said shortly. "He hasn't got any."

Foss stood up, his face very solemn. "Billy," he said, "it looks like I'll be fightin' alone. Tomorrow morning Marshal Bowie is going to disinter your father's remains!"

BILL THATCHER appeared unimpressed. "That's fine," he said. "I'm getting a little tired of being a ghost, anyway."

Again that night they took turns on watch. Purdy's gunmen did not appear. It was apparent that the railroad boss was marshaling his forces for a showdown fight tomorrow night, if the Miners' Pool resisted.

In the morning they ate a quiet breakfast, watching the alarm clock. The disinterment had been set for ten o'clock. Abby, who had no stomach for the morning's grisly show, volunteered to stay on guard at the mine. Bill and Foss rode down in the hot morning sunlight.

Out at the cemetery on a knoll north of town a small crowd waited for Bowie to appear. On the brushy eminence the chapparal and larger rocks had been cleared away for a space of several hundred feet square, a gaunt, inhospitable holy ground. There were a dozen marble markers standing white or brown among the stones and dry weeds, and scores of wooden headboards. Where a coffin had caved in, the ground dipped much lower and the grass grew greener.

Mark Purdy was already on hand, his beard freshly trimmed, his gray chalk-stripe suit in perfect press. Ed Clint's skin had an unhealthy look in the merciless daylight. But all of the railroad crowd except Mike Moriarty appeared confident and unworried. Mike had a cigar in his big jaws and he kept chewing it and spitting on the stony ground.

Someone said, "There's Bowie!" and they all looked down the hill to where the marshal was riding up the trail to the graveyard.

Purdy walked over to Bill. "I'd like a word with you in private, Thatcher," he said.

Bill went with him over to a plot that was set off by a low iron fence. Purdy gave him a long, calculating look.

He said suddenly, "You're making a lot of trouble for both of us. Why don't you quit this ham acting and show some sense?"

Bill said, "How?"

"I'm prepared to buy you off, Thatcher. I presume that's what you want, anyway. I'll deposit five thousand dollars to your account in Santa Fé today, if you'll simply ride out of Gunsight and forget to come back. We'll call off this grave-digging business right now. How about it?"

"I wish I could, Purdy," Bill said, and he sounded genuinely regretful. "I wish to hell I could. But you see, I've still got to kill you and run your crowd out of town, and I couldn't very well take your money and then do that, could I?"

Above the beard, Mark Purdy's face went red. "Damn you for a die-hard four-flushing fool!" he said. "You asked for it, mister, and now you're going to get it!"

Marshal Bowie left his pony with the others at the edge of the trees and carried the spade over to a teetering pine marker which had considerable space to itself. Bill was in the front rank of men who surrounded him, and gradually, he discovered that he was standing alone, as his father's grave stood alone. Bowie read haltingly from an official document empowering him to open the grave, but Bill's attention was focused on the headstone.

"*Pasó por Aquí*: William T. Thatcher," it said. "February 23, 1871."

Not many words for a man who had died for others. Even the old Spanish form—*Pasó por Aquí*—was the phrase used by outlaws when they "registered" at one of the hideouts used by their breed.

After fifteen minutes of steady digging by Marshal Bowie and a couple of volunteers, the coffin was uncovered. Bowie worked ropes about it and they hoisted the crumbling pine box to the daylight. With a pry-bar, he loosened the lid. He took a long breath and got hold of the lid with both hands.

If he had said, "Boo!" at that instant, probably at least twenty men would have died of heart-failure. They were all standing with their arms hanging loose and their heads slightly bent to see into the coffin when it came open. Bill Thatcher was conscious of many small things: of the concentrate mill pounding in the distance; of the smell of cigar smoke; of the way the freshly-turned earth lay black on the dry, pebbly ground.

Bowie raised the lid and laid it aside. He looked inside with a horror in his eyes, and he said in a whisper: "*It's empty!*"

BILL THATCHER had been expecting, in a sort of intuitive way, that something strange would develop. But this turn caught him cold-footed. He was still standing there before the silent crowd when Mark Purdy spoke. His voice was normally pitched but it sounded as though he were shouting.

"Marshal, I demand the arrest of this man, William T. Thatcher. He is the real Brimstone Bill, and no ghost!"

Bowie looked from one to the other. "I can't arrest him!" he said. "He was sentenced to be hung—and I hung him!"

Purdy's bearded lips smiled. "No, Marshal. The sentence was that he would be 'hung by the neck until dead, *dead, dead!*' There is still half of the sentence to be executed!"

Bill Thatcher saw the turn things were taking. It was not a time to argue, with a lynch-crowd rising before him and a dozen gunmen ready to cut him down. He turned suddenly and plowed into the crowd of miners, dragging his guns as he ran. They fell back with frightened yells, and Bill was at the horses.

He had the trees between him and the guns, but for a while he still heard a bullet occasionally snap through the branches. He won the willow groves of the river, and he let the horse run up the sandy bank for a quarter-mile.

At the bridge he dismounted and let the horse run on. The posse was far behind; he crossed the creek and was inside the wolf willows when the riders strung by. He saw three of them stop short of the bridge and sit their saddles by the creek. Mark Purdy and his cronies took no chances.

"Let 'em go," Purdy said to Clint and Mike Moriarty. "Bowie will have to hunt him down, now. Even if he escapes, I don't reckon he'll be back."

"That was a cute idea," Ed Clint smiled, "throwing out Thatcher's bones and leaving an empty coffin. Only I was afraid Bowie would notice the new nails."

"Bowie was in no condition to notice anything. We might as well get back. I've got some figuring to do before we hit Foss Glenn's place tonight."

Mike Moriarty showed somewhat less relief than the others. He said, "I'd still like to know what kind of blood that hombre would spill if you put a slug in him."

When they had ridden back to Gunsight, Bill Thatcher climbed by devious trails to Glenn's cabin. He did not risk the door, but went to the rear window and spoke to Abby, who sat by the front door.

Abby started. "Bill! What happened? I didn't hear your horse."

"I'm all through playing ghost. Dad's grave had been emptied before they dug it up. I've got a price on me, now. I'm due to hang for the same killings my old man did!"

Abby came to the window. "They'll never get you, Bill," she said. "Take my horse if you've lost yours. I can show you a trail—"

Bill told her, "I'm not done with them yet. I'm going to hole up in one of your dad's drifts until night. Then I make my last call on the railroad boys. It looks like the only way left."

"You'd have liked ranching, wouldn't you?" Abby said. "I watched you when you were looking down at Cow Creek Valley yesterday. You didn't look like the hell-raiser you're supposed to be. You looked like a man who was eating his heart out for something he couldn't have."

"I'm not worrying about cows much right now," Bill told her. "After it gets good and dark you might bring me up some chow. Man can't fight on an empty stomach."

HE FOUND an old drift which had not been worked, apparently, for several months. There was three or four inches of water on the floor, but Bill managed to stay on the plank-rail down the center.

After a long time he went to the corner and glanced out, and he could tell by the golden light flooding the drift that it was approaching dusk. Foss Glenn was being cautious, keeping clear of the tunnel. It might have been an hour later that he heard boots approaching the mine, and he stepped to the corner and waited.

It was fairly dark now, only a dingy gray light outlining the entrance, but to eyes accustomed to blackness certain details were quite clear. Bill was able to recognize the shape of Matt Gower, who was coming carefully down the tunnel. Bill drew his gun, perplexed. He didn't like or trust Gower; and it rubbed his temper that Abby had told the mine boss where to find him.

Then he realized something else: Gower did not know he was here. He lay down on the plank about fifteen feet inside the mine and did not make a sound. He carried a rifle which he laid on the walk beside him.

It was more than Bill could figure out. He decided he could wait an hour or two before he must leave, and certainly Gower would show his hand by then. In about fifteen minutes Bill heard a sound which brought him up like a drum-roll. Hoofs were clattering up the trail to the cabin!

Now Gower stood up and went to the portal. Bill heard a voice he knew well. Foss Glenn barked, "That's as far as you're comin'. Purdy! If you take me, I take you and a few others."

"Don't play the fool," Purdy retorted. "We're bound to get you. If you want to get out peaceably, I'll pay you a hundred dollars and we'll call it square."

Foss Glenn did not have an opportunity to answer. Matt Gower had raised his gun carefully to his shoulder, and suddenly it roared and the tunnel was cleft with a lance of red. A man cried out.

Bill heard Ed Clint say in the hush that followed, "He got him, boys. The old gut-shooter got Mike . . . !"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Last Resting-Place of Brimstone Bill

"WAIT a minute!" That was Foss Glenn shouting into the growing murmur of angry men's voices. "There ain't even a shell cracked in my gun. You can look. That came from the mine!"

Purdy shouted him down. "I've got my belly full of you, Glenn. We're takin' you down to Bowie. You won't crawl out of this one. Take him, boys—"

Bill Thatcher started like a cat along the

plank-walk, determined to be in on this fight if it were his last. He was within six feet of Gower when he heard the miner say, "All right, Purdy. I've dropped my gun."

That, Bill knew, was for Abby. Foss was laying down his life without a struggle so that she would not be hurt. He heard them tying him into his saddle, and then the retreating clatter of their hoofs came to him.

Matt Gower opened the bolt of his rifle and threw out the spent shell. He gave a start and a gasp when Bill Thatcher's gun touched the back of his neck.

"We're going down to the house and write a little note to the sheriff, now, Matty," Bill said. "Let's not have any unpleasantness."

Gower went down the slope like a man in a trance. Outside the cabin he stopped and confronted Bill. He was sweating; his ruggedly handsome features were loose.

"Bill," he said. "This is no skin off your nose. Moriarty had it coming. He's been soft as butter since he married Floss Adams. One of the girls learned from Floss that he was walking out on us—"

"Us?" Bill smiled.

"Why try to kid you?" Gower said. "Mark set me up in this job to line the boys up for him. You can help Glenn and do yourself some good, too. I'll swear that I saw somebody fire from the hill but I couldn't see who it was. That will clear Glenn—and I'll give you a pocketful of money to carry away."

Everybody wants to give me money," Bill remarked. "The trouble is, they want to kill me, too. I think I'll just get you to write down how it really happened."

When Gower began to argue, Bill suddenly slapped him on the ear with the gun-barrel. Gower staggered. Bill straightened him with a shove in the face.

"Get in there, you double-crossing money-killer," he said. "I'd gun you right here, only you're more use to me alive."

Abby had come to the door. She saw them there in the gloom, and Bill could see the white patch of her face in the lamplight. She said, "Matt! They've got Dad!"

Bill laughed. "That's no news to Matt," he said. "He killed Moriarty. Now he's going to tell you all about it. He'll talk and you write it down."

Abby gasped: "Matt! It's not true!"

Matt Gower shoved her out of the way and went into the cabin. They followed him in and Bill sat the miner down at the table and took a chair a little distance away. Abby, pale and silent, got a pencil and paper.

BILL took his man into town by a back street. He left his horse behind the livery stable and took Gower up the alley between the stable and the jail. The town was quiet.

Gower tried once more. "A thousand dollars!" he said. "For God's sake, Bill—would you hang a good man for a cull like Mike?"

"It's been done before," Bill told him. He prodded Gower into the street and up the two steps to the jail.

Hank Bowie was behind his desk with a bottle. He looked about half-shot, and when he saw Bill Thatcher, he came to his feet and seemed undecided whether or not to go for his gun.

"I wouldn't," Bill said. "I've got something for you to read."

Hank Bowie put on his glasses and held the paper under the yellow spill of the lamp. He had to read it twice. Then he looked at Gower without surprise, immensely relieved. He blew out his cheeks in a great sigh.

"Yes, sir, that's it!" he said. "That's going to break some hearts and stretch some necks around here. You done the job, Bill." He took a key from his desk and they choused the miner down the corridor. Bowie unlocked a cell and pushed Gower inside. "Got a friend of yours in here," he said to Bill.

He opened another door. Foss Glenn, sitting on the bunk with his head in his hands, looked up. Bill started in. Very quietly, Marshal Bowie lifted Bill's guns and gave him a quick, hard shove into the cell. He slammed the door.

Bill stood there, stupidly. The marshal was grinning, pleased with himself. "The unfortunate part of it," he said, "is that you haven't cleared yourself yet. Personally, I'm convinced that you're Bill Thatcher's son; you damn well ain't a ghost. Now, there ain't a doubt but what we'll find your dad's bones, and when we do I'm letting you out. Meanwhile, I've got you where I know you won't be getting into any gun-scrapes."

Bill's big hands clenched the bars. "Hank!" he said. "Haven't you ever heard of lynch-law? While I'm locked up here Purdy's got a free hand to sic his rabble on me."

Bowie shook his head. "I'm going down now and telegraph the U. S. Marshal at El Paso. Then I'll take Purdy and Clint into custody—"

"If they let you," Bill said.

Bowie was moving away. "You leave the details to me," he said.

Bill sat down beside Foss. "I guess I should be happy," he said, "but I ain't. Old Hank may botch the job. Then we're in a worse spot than ever."

"Worryin' won't help none," said Foss. "I mind the time your dad was in here. 'Foss,' he said, 'I find the time pretty heavy. I kinda thought I'd like to carve my own headstone. Do you suppose you could find me a nice, stout twelve-by-three, about five feet long?' Well, I got him a nice piece of mountain mahogany, and he worked a week with his pocket knife.

Flowers, he carved, and little doo-dads around the letters. It was shore pretty. Course, it's got a little warped with the years."

A SLOW, crawling sensation marched down Bill Thatcher's spine. He had the miner's forearm in a crushing grip. "Foss!" he said. "That's it! That's where he hid the evidence on Purdy! In his own headstone!"

Glenn blinked. "Don't hardly seem likely."

Bill was up and pacing the floor. "He said it was hid in a place I'd stumble over but nobody else ever would. Wouldn't his grave fit that to a T? Who'd visit it, except me?"

He heard the jail door open again, and he pressed to the grille, trying to see into the office. He heard the desk drawer slide. Hank was getting the key to let them out! Footfalls echoed in the corridor; but when Bill saw the flame-red hair of the visitor a tension came over him. He was remembering Mike Moriarty's bag in the cabin, and what Gower had said about Mike and Floss being married.

Floss came down the hall, swinging her hips, decked out in a green silk dress, with long gold ear-rings swinging against her white neck. She was twirling the key-ring; in her other hand she carried a forty-five.

She saw Bill, and she said, "Hello, honey. Have you seen my pal, Matt Gower?"

Bill said, "Matt's out on bail."

Mike Moriarty's wife shook her head, making the ear-bobs swing. "That's noble of you," she said. "But they're saying down at the saloon that he's locked up. Clint and Purdy are trying to figure how to spring him." Then she saw Gower, standing in the shadows at the back of his cell. She went over and unlocked his door and threw it open.

"I'm giving you a fighting chance, Matt," she said, her voice as cold as gray iron. "You didn't give my Mike any. But if you can take this away from me, you can walk out of here scot-free."

Gower took it well, standing straight and scowling. "That's no chance," he told her. "You've got me coppered."

Floss was still smiling in that warped, eerie fashion. "It's as much chance as you gave him," she said. "He was all I had. But you killed him, because he was afraid. . . ."

"Look here, Floss," Gower said; and then he sprang towards her, diving low.

The girl shot him in the head as he crashed against her. She threw the gun across the cell and backed out. Her hands went up to cover her face, and she began to cry hysterically.

Bill Thatcher felt sick and shaken. "Listen to me," he said. "We didn't see anything. I reckon that was your privilege. He'd have hung anyway. Unlock this thing and then get out of here."

Floss Moriarty let them out. She looked at him pitifully. "Mike wasn't a coward," she said. "He didn't want to kill you because—because he liked you."

"Sure," Bill said. "We were practically buddies." He watched her hurry out, with her misery and her illusions.

FOSS GLENN was getting old, and his reflexes weren't too good. He would have stood there all night if Bill hadn't taken him by the arm and shoved him out. In the top drawer of the marshal's desk he found his two guns, and he gave one to Glenn.

His pony was still waiting out in back. He mounted, and Foss swung up behind him. Bill followed Silver Creek until they came abreast of the cemetery.

No one had bothered to replace the headstone. It lay across a roughly shaped mound of earth, its lower end rotted, the carved end cracked and weathered. With his finger-tips Bill tested the smooth sides of it. When he had checked both sides and found nothing, he began to worry. Then he slid his finger over the butt-end of the headboard, and he drew a long breath.

"This is it," he said. With a pocket-knife he worked a wooden plug out of the mahogany. He shook the board upside down so that a roll of water-marked paper tumbled out. Bill unrolled it. "Light a match, Foss," he said.

*"To whom it may concern:"* they read. *"I don't reckon I'll live to testify in court. I'm adyin' here with a slug in my lung that Mark Purdy put there. And I ask God and Brimstone Bill Thatcher to witness that he shot me without I was even armed.*

*Yours truly,*
*John H. Underwood."*

When the good citizens of Gunsight saw them ride down Market Street, Bill Thatcher in the saddle and Foss Glenn behind him with a tombstone under his arm like a schoolbook, excitement began to run free. By the time they stopped before the Gateway to Hell, every miner and cowboy on the street was standing still to watch them enter the saloon.

The first thing they heard when they entered was the voice of Hank Bowie. He was at the middle of the long mahogany bar, pounding with a gun-butt.

"I don't care if he's in conference with the King o' Siam!" he bawled. "You tell him Bowie wants to see him. Where's Clint?"

There were a lot of smiles in the saloon, which died when Bill and Foss began to move down the bar.

"Mr. Clint is with Mr. Purdy," he said. "They're upstairs, and I don't reckon they want to be bothered, Marshal!"

Bill went behind the bar and planted the

headstone against the back-bar. The saloon was now very quiet; even the girls stopped their empty-headed chatter. The bartenders were moving away from Bill. He said to the head bartender: "Bring out the champagne, Baldy. The house is going to drink."

HE POUNDED on the bar with a beer-mug. "Gather 'round, boys!" he said. "We're gonna drink to the memory of the finest gent that ever hung—Brimstone Bill Thatcher! I'm his son, and I ought to know. Pour 'em up, boys."

The bartenders got to work, stimulated by the gun in his hand. But the crowd hung back from the ghoulish invitation, until Bill fired a shot into the piano. "Step up!" he commanded. "Everybody's going to toast Brimstone Bill. The man that doesn't drink can step outside with me."

They began to move up, cowboys and miners, bar girls and men who were on Mark Purdy's payroll. Marshal Bowie got into the spirit of it, relieved to have some tried guns behind him, and not particular how they got there. He sat on the bar and waved a glass.

"I give you Brimstone Bill!" he said. "The only man I was ever sorry I hung!"

They drank. Corks were popping like Gatling guns and the sweating bartenders filled the glasses as fast as the crowd could shove them under the bottles. After a few rounds Bill went to the end of the bar. He mounted to the first landing of the stairway and faced the crowd.

Bill went up the stairs. He heard Foss coming behind him as he reached the top. He walked down the dark hallway to Purdy's office, and through the door he could hear the low run of tense voices. Quietly he tried the knob, but the door was locked.

Ed Clint barked: "Who is it?"

Bill kicked the door hard with his spiked boot-heel, just below the knob. The door slammed back, and Bill went in low. He had one split second to see the pair at the table, and then the lamp-flame went up the chimney in a long tongue, drawn by the suction of the opening door, and the darkness rushed into every cranny of the room.

From Ed Clint's place a gun fired twice into the floor where Bill had fallen. Bill heard the slugs chop through the planks at his side, but he had rolled clear. He heard the saloon-man scuttle out of line. He had his gun cocked, following the sounds. Mark Purdy had not fired or moved.

Bill had had an idea what course Clint's bravery would take. He was watching the dark rectangle of the door, and suddenly a shape moved into it. Outside, in the dark, Foss was calling, "Bill! Bill! Where are you?"

Clint moved sharply, swinging towards the miner's voice, and in that instant Bill shot. Clint went into the hall, stumbling. He came up against the opposite wall and went down with a soft, boneless thumping. Mark Purdy fired his first shot, not figuring on Bill's having the quickness to move as soon as the shot was off. Bill was under the table when the bullet struck. Purdy still sat there.

He was very quiet, listening. Bill knew the thoughts that would be slogging through his terrified brain: *Did I get him?"*

Purdy started to rise, the chair creaking. Bill dived, striking him in the chest and carrying him over backwards. He had the yelling, frightened man's gun-barrel in his grip, and with a sharp twist he disarmed him. Purdy's beard scraped his cheek as they crashed to the floor and began to roll.

Bill pinned him down with a hand on the throat. Purdy went slack.

"Not this way!" he croaked.

Bill said, "No, Purdy. Not this way. I said you'd hang. And I'll be in the crowd watching you dance when you do. I only wish Brimstone Bill could see it. . . ."

ON SATURDAY they found Brimstone Bill Thatcher's bones in the bosque of Silver Creek. Bill had a real funeral for him, with the preacher from Arroyo to read from the Bible. There were wild-flowers and a new stone marker. Afterward, he and Abby rode over to Cow Creek and made some plans.

"I'll fence in that lower half of the meadow," Bill said. "Make a dandy tallow pasture."

Abby was looking, not too enthusiastically, at the cabin. "That thing will have to be cleaned from top to bottom. I'll bet your dad didn't even own a broom, nor Purdy's punchers. It ought to be enlarged by about three rooms, too." With her toe she stirred the dark soil. "We could grow the best kitchen garden in New Mexico in this ground, Bill," she said.

They rode along, engrossed in their own thoughts, which really had a common basis. Suddenly Bill said, "Abby—we're forgettin' something. We're making a lot of plans that we haven't got any right to make, yet."

Abby frowned. "Why, that's right. I wonder if that preacher has gone back to Arroyo?"

"I think he was going to preach a sermon against whisky in the opera house tomorrow," he said. "But maybe we'd better head back, in case he changes his mind. Or you change yours."

"Mine's all made up," Abby told him. "Sing something, Bill."

Bill unlimbered his old guitar and sang a song as they rode—the happy one.

THE END

Three Cheyenne came up, trying to seize Red's bridle.

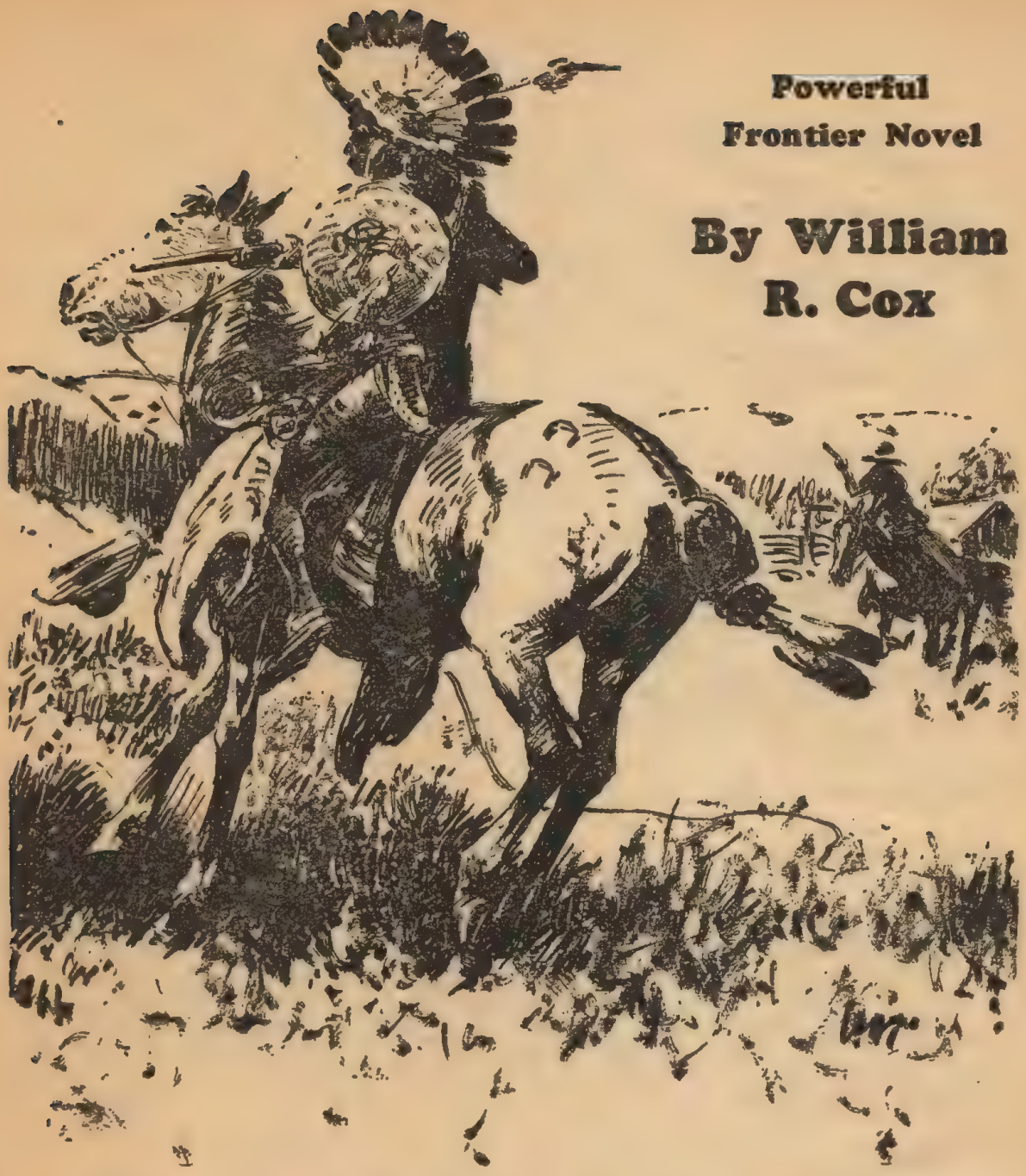
**Dick Clyman's neighbors swore that the only good redskin was a dead one. But when Dull Knife's starving, desperate band came to Dick's little horse spread, Dick knew he'd have to prove those stubborn cowmen wrong—or the only good ranchers would no longer be among the living!**

# ★ END OF

## CHAPTER ONE

### "The Only Good Injun's a Dead One!"

DICK CLYMAN came into the Agency store and stood quietly, listening, his face grave. Pierre Covert was behind the counter and Mona Covert sat on a high stool, half in the shadow. Dick wished he could



**Powerful Frontier Novel**

**By William R. Cox**

# THE RED WAR-TRAIL

see her face. The uncertainty was the worst thing about it.

Bull Montell was doing the talking as usual. He was saying vehemently, "Dull Knife, Little Wolf, all of 'em are on Crow Butte—we seen smoke signals and mirror flashes. They come all the way from Indian Territory through the dumb Army a-plunderin' and a-murderin'. If we don't go after the red devils they'll git every hoss in the country, and plenty scalps."

Dick said, "They may not come here. They want horses."

Bull wheeled about, his heavy features snarling. He had never liked Dick since the episode of the Cheyenne buck. Bull had been beating the buck for alleged stealing when Dick stopped him. Bull said, "You're an Injun-lover an'

everybody knows it! Nobody wants to hear your say-so."

Jiggs and Nason and Lamont were in the store. Each had a small ranch, but none were close enough neighbors to rally their stock for protection. They looked uneasily at Dick. They were frightened of the Cheyennes, of course. Dick did not blame them.

In fifty days old Dull Knife had led his pitiful band of expatriates more than one thousand miles. Warriors, women and children had eluded more than two thousand seasoned troops of the U. S. Army. They had crossed military barriers at the Kansas-Pacific, the Union Pacific in Nebraska, the Niobarra, the Bear Butte column which was the mighty 7th Cavalry domain . . . and then the Yellowstone where General Gibbon failed. Now it was October, and they had come to Crow Butte in their desperate attempt to join Sitting Bull over the Canadian border.

Dick said, "The Government had no right to move Dull Knife and his men down south. The women and children were dying in that climate."

"They hadda get the murderin' devils outa the Black Hills or how could we mine thet gold?" howled Bull Montell. "Congress said so, didn't they? We made a treaty, didn't we?"

Dick said, "We drove them out. They surrendered and only asked to be left with the Ogallalas. . . ." He stopped. It wasn't any use trying to tell these people. They were Indian-haters. They didn't know proud old Dull Knife and brave Little Wolf. They hadn't been born in the Black Hills, grown up with the tribesmen. To them, the only good Indian was a dead one. Dick said, "They want horses. The reason they can make these long marches is that they use their mounts, kill 'em, steal others. The troops have a single mount per man. That's stupid, but that's Army regulations. The troops stop to water and rest. The Cheyennes move day and night. And they can fight when they have to." He remembered them from childhood, fighting like madmen, but shrewdly, against the Pawnees. They were magnificent fighters.

Bull sneered, "They won't touch *your* hosses, Injun-lover!"

Dick shrugged. "I'll take care of my ranch. You go chase Dull Knife and see what happens."

He started to the rear of the store, where Mona sat so quiet on her stool. Pierre, who knew Indians too, smiled at him. Mona did not smile. Dick whispered to her, "Have you decided? I found where I could get walnut for the new rooms. The house was fixed for you, five years ago. Everything is ready for you, Mona."

The door banged. Bull shouted, "Here's our man! Red'll take us up there!"

Jiggs, Nason, Lamont, even Pierre brightened, all facing Red Randall. He was tall, he was handsome, his green eyes were reckless. His white-toothed smile flashed at them. He came on swift feet to where Mona sat and took her hand. He wore fringed buckskin and his auburn hair was long. It was a fading style, but it seemed right on the graceful, catlike figure.

Red said, "I came as soon as I heard about the Cheyenne. I was scared you'd be hurt, honey." A trace of the South lingered in his speech.

She said, "Thank you, Red." She smiled now, freely, and the dingy store lit up. They were a handsome couple, Dick admitted. It stabbed him deeply, but they seemed suited to each other.

Red slapped Dick's shoulder. "Old stick-in-the-mud, you missed it! Two grizzlies. Plenty of deer. Found a new stream, I think. You'd give your eye-teeth to see the lake in the valley."

Dick said, "I had work to do, Red. Did you find gold?"

The handsome young man said ruefully, "Nary a trace. But old Whittaker knows another spot. I'm goin' out as soon as the Cheyennes are massacred."

Dick said, "I've got a horse for you. A stallion."

"Good old Dick!" said Red. "Always my sidekick, huh Mona?"

Mona said merrily, "He just stays behind, and raises horses for you and makes money while you hunt gold. Lucky Red!"

"When I strike it, I'm goin' to make him rich too," said Red, gripping Dick's shoulder in iron fingers. He turned his attention to the waiting men. He said, "Well, who's ready to start? I got a grudge agin' Little Wolf. He stole one of Dick's cayuses off me one time!"

"We're all ready, 'ceptin' yore Injun-lover friend," said Bull spitefully. "A half-dozen of us kin take care of them ontil the troops come up—if Clyman here don't warn Dull Knife!"

Red slid forward like a mountain lion. He said tersely, "Shut your yawp, Bull! Dick's my sidekick."

Bull retreated before the blazing green eyes. "Waal, he shore loves Injuns, 'special Cheyennes," he muttered.

Red said, "Get your mounts and take plenty shells. I know a way up Crow Butte. I'd sure like to sight on Little Wolf. . . ."

THE others bought shells from Pierre, looked to their weapons, went out chattering. Dick stood motionless, arms folded. Red came back and said, "I'll be back. . . . Wait for me, Mona, honey?"

He always said that. She always nodded,

smiling at him. When he left, the store was dim again. Pierre, rearranging his stock, was a bent-backed storekeeper and Mona a silent, thoughtful girl. Dick unfolded his arms and leaned on the counter. He said steadily, "No use talkin' to Red. But that's the Army's job. The Government has been rotten to the Cheyennes. Do you understand, Mona?"

"They killed Mrs. Jackson and her baby last week," said Mona tonelessly. "They stole all the Jackson stock."

"They were driven to it!" said Dick. He took a deep breath, trying to make himself understood. "I'm not sayin' I wouldn't fight them if they came in on me—and they will, if they can. Once on the warpath there is nothin' deadlier'n a Cheyenne. But I won't go huntin' a miserable tribe of folks tryin' to get back home, just for the sake of braggin' about it. I won't do it, Mona!"

She said, "No, Dick. I know you won't. You're not much on fighting, are you, Dick? But you're insinuating that Red loves to fight for the sake of the battle—and that he boasts afterwards."

Dick sighed. He said, "I was talking about Bull Montell. You can tell him that, Pierre, when he comes in. I'm sick of the sight of him. Maybe a Cheyenne bullet will get him and save a white man the trouble. . . ." He was aware of a rare gust of anger. He turned his back on Mona and started away.

Then he came back and stood directly before her. He had cool gray eyes and his back was very straight. He said, "You won't give me an answer, Mona? Not even a refusal?"

She softened, touching him with her fingers. She said, "You've built me a house. You've made a success, with your horses. You've asked nothing, not even a kiss. . . . I appreciate all that, Dick. But don't press me now, please!"

"It's Red," he said resignedly. "I wish you'd never gone East to school, Mona. You got romance in your head."

She said, "I met you there. Remember?"

He grinned wryly. He had been the romantic Westerner then, riding his strange saddle in the Park, courting the lovely Eastern girl. He said, "You got me, Mona. I wouldn't have you changed. Not a hair of your head." He went out to the fine red bay at the hitching post, a blazing-eyed, deep-barreled son of mustangs called Laramie. He mounted and rode for the Buffalo Ranch he had built up so painstakingly over the years.

The picture of Mona, still slumbering, but any moment to be awakened, rode with him every foot of the twenty miles. Dick was nearly thirty; the girl was five years younger. They would have been married long since had it not been for Red Randall. . . .

He thought of Red, leading the small band up into the hills after Dull Knife. Red would come through; he always did. But the others —Dick shook his head. They continually underestimated the Cheyennes. He thought he heard faraway shots, and his jaw set, but he did not turn.

THE house was well-built, and Dick had managed linens and glassware, deep, comfortable furniture. There were curtains at the windows, ironed by Wah Lee, always fresh and ready for the girl who did not come. Dick poured himself straight whisky and drank it off.

He told Banty Dolan what he wanted. The little strawboss said, "I got the herd in the corrals, all but a few. I got Jake and Dizzy and Frisco on guard, and I got the others keepin' watch. But if Dull Knife hits us, we'll lose cayuses."

"Nobody can keep a Cheyenne from a horse he needs," said Dick. "It's a damned shame, Banty. They'll come and we'll have to fight them."

Banty spat. "I've fit Sioux, Arapahoe, Cheyenne all my life. The only good Injun is a corpus."

Dick sent the loyal little man away. There was no use trying to tell even his own cowboys about the Cheyenne. They were prejudiced, and with reason.

For the Cheyenne, proudest and greatest of the Plains Indians, were honorable but fierce. Allied with the Sioux, they had helped massacre Custer, had destroyed many a settler's cabin. No use to point out that they were brave, honest, sincere when fairly treated. The surge of empire westward was in the hands of politicians, now. There never was and never would be fair treatment for the Indian.

He sat on his verandah, wrapped in a jacket against the chill of the early Wyoming autumn. He had hunted and played and fought with the Cheyenne. They knew him. He knew that they would come.

He had not long to wait. Like a wraith from another world the ponies drifted soundlessly to the yard, stopped short. Not even Banty had seen them coming. In the house Wah Lee whooshed and picked up an ancient Sharps. Dick did not move.

The tall, straight Indian was clad only in a canvas clout, impervious to weather. He was old, but his muscles were clean and rippling in the light of the lamp from within. He said in his own language, "Gray Feather, I have come."

Dick stood up. "Dull Knife, it is good to see you—alive." He handed a clean pipe and tobacco to the chieftain. He struck a light for the smoke and they squatted side by side, in a shadow where none could easily see them. The

four silent braves took their places, on guard.

Dull Knife said, "I must have horses."

"No," said Dick.

Dull Knife said, "The Cheyennes must move north or die. The Cheyennes do not wish to steal the horses of their friend, Gray Feather, who gained his name among us." He puffed on the pipe, took a deep breath. "When Cheyennes kill, they make an end to their enemies. White men are not so, Gray Feather. White men condemn us to slow, lingering, lonely death in the south. You know our nature. Would you see us die thus?"

"No," said Dick.

"The Cheyennes have died on this journey," said the old man. "If there are to be Cheyennes alive, I must travel onward."

DICK said, "Sitting Bull is an old fraud. You'll get into trouble in Canada. Why don't you make terms? I've been to Washington, trying to get them to let you stay in the Black Hills."

"The White Father will not permit Cheyennes to remain with Sioux. The Ogallala are in the Black Hills. These things I know, my brother. The White Father is a lie!" He stated it as a matter of fact, without rancor. He was a wise old man, and weary, but unafraid. "The Cheyenne need your horses. You are rich. Would you have us die?"

Dick said, "I am not rich. My horses are my wealth, like any Indian."

Dull Knife handed back the pipe, careful that the hot bowl should not burn Dick's hand. He said, "I know you, Gray Feather. It will be hard. But the Cheyenne must have horses."

Dick said, "Good hunting, Dull Knife."

The tall old Indian walked back to his sorry-looking cayuse and slid effortlessly aboard. The Cheyennes faded into the darkness. Wah Lee came popping out, his queue dancing angrily. "Me shoot! Me kill Injun!"

Dick said sharply, "Get back into the house. Don't fire that gun unless someone comes shootin'—and then you'll miss, you yellow peril!"

Wah Lee said, "Damn Injun want my hair!" He went into the house. Dick strode to the barn, saddled Laramie. He rode swiftly to the corrals. Banty came up on a buckskin and said, "All's quiet around here."

Dick said tersely, "Dull Knife and his braves got through. They gave me warning."

"G'wan!" said Banty.

"They were my friends," said Dick. "Now they're desperate. I could have given them twenty head, maybe, and got away with it. I wouldn't because they'll kill any white man who comes up on them. God knows they've got the right. . . . Warn the boys. They'll steal horses tonight."

Banty said, "Not if I ketch sight of the thievin' varmints! Not if the boys git to 'em."

"They came through once," said Dick. "They'll do it again."

He made the rounds, spoke to Jake, Dizzy, Frisco. They were picked men and they would fight. He went back to the house, took down a Henry repeating carbine and made sure it was ready. He donned two Colt revolvers and felt slightly foolish, for he never wore a gun except on the range. But he filled all six chambers of each weapon. He was sick at heart, but he knew what must be done. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Cheyenne Are Coming!

HE WAS leaving the house when the clatter of hoofs came. He stared at the cavalcade, then ran out and helped Mona to dismount. Her eyes were pools of fright in the lamplight. Red swung down from a spent black and said sharply, "Your Cheyennes hit us hard, drove us to the store. They got Jiggs, Nason and Lamont. Bull's comin' up with Pierre—he's wounded."

Dick said, "Jumped you, eh?"

"We jumped them," said Red frankly. "Didn't know there were so many. Mona, are you all right?"

She whispered, "I'm alive. They're coming here, aren't they, Dick?"

Red said, "It was Little Wolf. He's a tough devil. I figgered they'd be after your hosses, Dick. Give us fresh mounts for Pierre and the gal and we'll send them on to Lamont's place. Mrs. Lamont's alone."

Dick watched Bull come in, leading a horse upon which was tied the small body of Pierre. Wah Lee rushed out and helped carry the wounded man inside, chattering like a magpie but tender as a woman. Dick said, "Too late. Dull Knife's been here."

Bull said loudly, "You mean you talked to thet devil? You didn't shoot him down?"

Dick said, "Shut up, Bull. You're on my land, now. The old man came to ask for horses, Red. We smoked a pipe."

Red leaned against the porch pillar, building a cigarette. He said in a hard voice, "You can carry things too far, Dick. Dull Knife's wanted by the Government."

Dick said, "He wanted to parley. He warned me they were comin' for the cayuses."

Bull jerked out, "Ye let him git away! Ye oughta be—"

Dick said, "I warned you, Bull!"

Red did not move or speak. Mona, following her father, stood a moment in the doorway. Dick saw her questioning stare, knew what she was thinking. Anger suffocated him for a moment as he strode forward.

Bull was a head higher and many pounds

heavier. Dick snapped at him, "We'll need every gun—but this is for luck."

Bull made a grab for his weapon. His revolver slid out neat and fast. Dick slapped viciously with the edge of his hand.

He caught the wrist, knocked the gun aside. He switched the position of his feet, quick as a cat. His hard fist lashed out. He felt it go home on Bull's jaw, threw two hard lefts to Bull's middle. The big man staggered, but did not go down.

Dick drew his own Colt. He held it loosely, whanging it at the side of Bull's head. The big man doubled over as though he had been cut in half and lay still upon the dirt of the yard.

DICK said, "I've been wantin' to do that. What's the matter, Red? You got somethin' crawlin' on you?"

Red's face was hard. "You should have killed Dull Knife. You've put Mona, all of us, in danger. Dammit, Dick, I don't understand you!"

Mona said, "Mr. Jiggs, Mr. Mason, Mr. Lamont all scalped! Oh, Dick, how could you let him escape?"

Dick stepped into the light. They could see his face, grave and calm now, the anger stifled. He said, "Let's understand this here and now. You're on my ranch. We've got to fight together." He paused, looking from one to the other as Red and Mona instinctively moved closer together. "This is no hooraw picnic. This is war with the Cheyenne. I know about them, more than either of you. We'd better leave our differences until afterwards. I can see how you feel, Mona. You and Red feel alike. Maybe you belong together. Meantime, we fight!"

Red said, "We'll fight, Dick. But we needn't have. . . ."

The two went inside the house, and Red poured whisky for himself and Pierre. The house was Red's base, his home, when he was not on a wild goose-chase after gold. Dick watched him, grim-faced. They had been friends for years, the devil-may-care Southerner and the slow-moving, quiet rancher. Now they were after the same girl, and Red had won.

Well, it was a free country, Dick thought wryly. He called Wah Lee to throw water on Bull. When the big man awoke, Dick said, "Get into the house and look sharp. When Pierre is comfortable, douse the lights."

Bull whined, "My jaw—I can't move!"

"Get up, you livery pup!" snapped Dick. "The Cheyenne are comin'!"

Bull managed to rise and limp indoors. Mona worked over Pierre, who was not badly hit, Dick thought. Red went about, moving furniture for a siege. The pleasant house was of frame construction. It would make a poor fort.

Dick turned his face toward the corrals and his precious horses. It did not matter any longer about the house. He had seen the girl turn naturally to Red. She had the romantic picture firmly in her mind, and Red was the man to fill it. There were no good Indians but dead Indians, and the quicker murdered the better—they all believed it.

It would be good to fight the Indians with the odds in their favor for once, Dick thought grimly. It might be good for them all to meet a brave enemy in a death struggle. They would learn about the Cheyenne tonight, and if they lived, they might profit.

BANTY said, "There's mebbe twenty head loose. The corrals are full."

There were four corrals, two of which had been hastily constructed at Dick's orders the moment he had heard that Dull Knife had jumped the reservation down south.

He said, "Open the gates, get all the men and drive eastward. You'll have to make the fastest and best drive ever, Banty."

Banty's jaw dropped. "Take them hosses out arter we built them big corrals? Air you crazy, boss? Dull Knife'll git us sure. Four of us cain't hold him off from stealin' most of the herd."

Dick said, "Don and Lefty will be in. That gives you six men. If you take the horses out there won't be a big fight here. We have Miss Covert and her wounded pappy to think about."

Banty said, "You're ruinin' yerself, boss! They'll hit you here for spite arter the hosses is gone. Dull Knife'll raid the herd and Little Wolf'll hit the house."

Dick said, "Go down the draw, then across Mad Mesa. Take the open plain and try for the arroyo beyond the lake—you know that way. If you make the lake, mount the tableland and make your stand."

Banty said, "Yeah, boss. If we made the tableland, we could hold 'em. Six men could fight a thousand of 'em."

Dick said, "Open the gates."

"You're doin' this fer the gal—and thet Red," said Banty acutely. "It's a turrible chance, Boss. I got to give it to ye, though. Dull Knife'll never expect this."

He went off to explain to the others. Don and Lefty came in, and Lefty said, "They're north of here, formin' up. There ain't more'n twenty-thirty, accordin' to tracks."

"Take out the herd," said Dick. He helped open the gates. Hundreds of fine animals swirled about him. The cowboys came in, fresh mounted now, yipping a little, chivvying the stallions into the lead. The mares followed meekly. In a little while they were all stretched

out and running easily across the moonlit plain.

Banty was as fine a horse herder as ever lived. The boys were all experienced and game. If they could make Mad Mesa, they could run across the plain and probably make the brake-covered tableland. . . . He hid the twenty head in a place he knew and thought about Dull Knife. . . .

Dick had no time to speculate. He turned and rode north, into the night. He held Laramie in check, proceeding cautiously. There was a fine moon and he made a good target. He had gone a half-mile when the sharp clatter of hoofs told him he was being followed. He reined into an elder patch and waited.

RED was riding one of Dick's buckskins from the cavvy Banty had carefully cut out to leave at the house. He called, "Dick! What have you done?"

Dick said, "Hush! Dull Knife's out here somewheres."

"You can't parley with that old devil!" said Red impatiently. "His men'll kill you!"

"I can try. If I hold him an hour, Banty'll get away. Go back and defend the house, Red."

"No."

Dick said, "You can't talk to Cheyenne. They don't trust you like they do me. Go on back."

Red rode into the thicket. He said, "Dull Knife won't think the way you do. Or if he does, his braves won't. You've got to come back to the house. Mona sent me after you—not that she had to, once I knew what was up."

Dick said, "It's my ranch, my herd and my life."

"You've got to come, Dick—"

Dick reached out swiftly, his hand touching Red's lips. Silence fell about them as even their mounts seemed to hold their breaths. A whippoorwill called. A dry scratching sound came from the north.

Dick whispered, "Too late—Dull Knife's trapped us."

Red's rifle leaped into his hands. He grated, "I'll kill that red old son!"

There was the whizzing sound of an arrow. For night fighting the bow was better than the gun, for it gave no flash to reveal the position of the bowman. The shaft went close to Red, between the two men. Dick slapped Red's horse on the flank. Laramie made a mighty jump and the buckskin followed.

They cleared the thicket. Dick had heard the motion ahead, to the left. His revolver spoke at close range. A Cheyenne screamed, chanting. Dick's voice mounted, "Dull Knife! It is I, Gray Feather! Call off your men!"

An unshod horse ran parallel to the two white men. Laramie tossed his head, champing the bit. Dick leaned far down, Indian fashion, as arrows came in a cloud. From under Laramie's neck he fired again. The shadow horse squealed and tumbled, and a flitting, ghost-like figure ran free. Red fired and missed.

"The ranch!" cried Dick. "Too late to parley now!" He thought bitterly, if Red had not come up and detained him in the thicket where it seemed they were lurking in ambush, he could have talked to Dull Knife. The old Indian was tetchy and suspicious, but Dick could have made him understand. Dull Knife still did not know that Little Wolf had come in from the west. . . .

Dull Knife would hit the corrals, find them empty. Then he would do one of two things. He would probably set out after the herd. But he might decide to strike for the small cavvy at the house and take his chances on getting more horses farther north. Dick knew the old man's line of reasoning. Dull Knife would choose the course which meant least loss of life. He was a statesman and leader as well as a warrior.

LARAMIE was going along like the wind, and the buckskin was following as best he could. Red was firing at imaginary targets behind him, cursing, fighting mad. Dick shook his head, concentrating on the ride. Up ahead two figures moved, in the almost invisible way the Cheyennes had of making both horse and rider miraculously hard to see. The moon threw a steady gleam of the Indian's favorite night light.

Red fired backwards again. Dick lifted his revolver and waited. When he was close enough he swerved Laramie, using only his knees, getting the reins in his teeth, holding both guns. He began to fire, blazing directly at the Cheyennes who had been placed to cut off his retreat.

The tired Indian cayuses broke, as he had expected. Both braves flung themselves down, tried to kneel and make a stand. Dick threw shots at them recklessly, but somehow he could not aim too well at these starving, gallant fighters. One pitched backwards, the other moved safely away.

Red called, "Have they got 'em every three yards? How the hell does Dull Knife do it?"

"He plans before he starts," said Dick. "He has a thousand eyes, like the night. Ride, damn it, Red!"

He cut across the back pasture, leaving the road. There were too few Cheyenne for Dull Knife to have covered anything but the known paths. The field was lumpy and Laramie began leaping high. Dick sat calmly, riding it out. Muskets banged as the Cheyenne followed into the pasture. Then there was a

loud, chagrined wail as some of them discovered the empty corrals.

Red panted, "We ought to give 'em a run down at the corrals and make 'em think."

Dick said, "If they'll split and send half after the horses—"

He jumped Laramie over a low rail fence. The buckskin's hoof hit the top bar behind him. Three Cheyenne came up, trying to seize the bridle of the horse Red rode. . . .

Laramie came around fast under the rein. Dick opened his mouth and put back his head. The yipping, terrible Cheyenne war-cry came from his throat. For a moment the braves froze, thinking they had made a grave error. Then Dick was among them, with Laramie kicking and biting like a snarling fury and Dick's revolvers popping like corn on a hearth.

One died under Red's fire. The other two fled. Dick kicked the buckskin toward the nearby house, thinking that they were very lucky this was a horse-stealing expedition and not a war. The Cheyenne would not have run if they were out for lives instead of mounts.

He could hear Dull Knife's deep voice now, calling the braves together. They would act quickly, either taking the trail after Banty or striking here. He said, "Into the house, Red. Little Wolf is coming, too, you know. There should be troops somewheres on Little Wolf's trail by now."

"Troops!" snorted Red. He dropped from the buckskin and stared up at Dick. "They won't never make it in time and you know it. What you plannin', Dick?"

Dick said, "Not anything, yet. I want to know which way Dull Knife is gonna jump." He told Red about the drive Banty was making. He explained patiently what he thought about the Cheyenne and what must be done.

Red said, "That's Injun thinkin', as I live and breathe. You got the foxy Injun mind when you want to, all right, Dick!"

THERE were no lights in the house. Red disappeared, content for a time. There was a hole in his buckskin jacket where an arrow had gone through, and he had lost his cap. His hair flung loosely about his shoulders. He was a very brave and gallant figure of romance—but if he had stayed where he belonged, Dick thought wryly, the running fight might have been avoided and Dull Knife would not yet know that the horses were gone from the corrals.

Laramie went willingly into a small shed and remained saddled, patient, waiting the man who had broken him, gentled him and treated him with kindness ever after. Dick went afoot toward the corrals. As yet there had been no attack on the silent house. Dull Knife would not burn wantonly—although vengeful braves of his command would not hesitate to take scalps if they knew anyone was in the house.

Snaking on his belly in the dust, Dick wished he was not dressed for riding. The naked Indians had the advantage at this work. He had learned scouting from them when he was in his teens, but that was long ago. A man couldn't be silent with a belt bearing two heavy revolvers and a string of ammunition. . . .

They were beyond the corrals, in the shadows, talking sign language, not making a sound. He saw them as he nestled against a fence post. He waited, his guns drawn. He could have shot Dull Knife several times and ended it all. The lean old man was plain in the moonlight, gesticulating forcefully with his lean old hands.

Banty had an even chance. Dick reckoned time and considered the spent condition of the Cheyenne ponies, and knew Banty might make it if no untoward incident delayed him.

Dull Knife was against attacking the house and making off with the dozen horses Banty had left. Dick, reading the sign language sketchily in the dark, saw that Dull Knife wanted to make after Banty, hit the herd as hard as they could, then resume the march northward. Others of the band dissented.

Dick crouched, his pulse pounding. If he could only call to his old friend, help him to send the Indians on.

That was the unpropititious moment when shots sounded to the west. Dull Knife and the others froze, listening. A wild, high cry sounded. It was Little Wolf and his blood-mad, marauding band which had hit Pierre's agency and had come on after the looting. They were attacking the house!

Dick lifted his guns, fired four quick shots. He saw Dull Knife and the others leap for their horses. He fired again, aiming this time. One of the braves yipped and never mounted his cayuse. A rattle of musketry sounded. Something hit Dick's left shoulder, then he was running as fast as he could for the house.

He couldn't stay out there and play tag with Indians with an arrow in him. He hoped he had panicked them a bit, but he had to make the house now—his house, carefully built for Mona. The greed and stupidity of other white men had placed his house, his horses and his life in jeopardy. . . . And Dull Knife was no longer his friend.

## CHAPTER THREE

### "Fight Me—Or Go!"

WAH LEE carefully cut off the shaft, pushed the arrowhead through. It was a nasty wound, jagged and sore, and Dick could

not move the shoulder freely. But he could use the hand to reload. He made sure his Colts were clean and said calmly, "Now they'll hit us, with gunfire, arrows, everything. They'll try to set the house afire first."

Mona breathed, "Oh, no! Not your house!"

Dick looked at her. She was very pale. She had held the basin while Wah Lee worked, and her hands had been steady enough. Red was patrolling the windows of the house, rifle in hand. Pierre was sitting up, a rumpled little man, with steady eyes. Pierre said, "What does he care about his house? He has taken us in. He has fought where he did not wish to fight. He is a brave man."

Red came into the kitchen and said stormily, "I'm goin' outside and keep 'em off as best I can."

Dick said dryly, "Red—if you go outdoors you'll be killed. Little Wolf is not Dull Knife. His men have orders to kill, kill, kill!"

"They'll pick us off," said Red restlessly.

Dick said, "I don't want them to have Laramie—but maybe I can get rid of them." He felt rested now. The wound throbbed, but his mind was so busy going over his plans that he did not have time to notice it much. He got up, steadied himself against the table.

"The skulkin' devil skelped Nason—I seen him," growled Bull. "If I could line 'im in my sights—"

"Skulking?" grinned Dick. "You were running, he was chasing you! Skulkin'! Look out he don't skulk up and bite you!"

He went around the house. The windows were not built for a siege, but for a full view of the countryside. Red had piled the oak furniture shrewdly. Pierre now took gun in hand and perched upon a chair, ready to fight. Mona silently loaded spare guns. It was a battle which could have but one end, Red knew. Cheyennes would die, but they would fire the house.

He went back to the kitchen where Wah Lee imperturbably cooked rice and warmed gravy. Mona followed him and said, You're weak from loss of blood."

"I'm all right," he said. "Stay low and if things go badly, surrender only to Dull Knife. Tell him you were my woman. . . ."

She said, "Do you think— I mean, is there no chance?"

DICK said carefully, "There is always a chance. The troops may come. Dull Knife may prevent Little Wolf from attacking us here. They want horses—Little Wolf's men are blood-crazed. They've seen their mothers, their wives and children die in the Territory, on this march. They're not entirely sane, ex-except Dull Knife and the older warriors."

She said, "You know them very well, don't you, Dick?"

"They were fine people," he said sadly. He went to the door and could not resist adding, "I hope you're happy—you and Red. I want you to have the ranch, the house, everything."

She moved swiftly across the room, more swiftly than he had believed possible. She caught him, whispering, "You wouldn't let Red go out there—you're not going!"

He said, "I'm going. Goodbye, Mona darling." He kissed her, at long last. He held her mouth beneath his, brutally, forcing her head back. He never knew how long it lasted.

He was in his own back yard. He whistled and Laramie came from the shed. A gun barked, and a bullet slashed past him into the corner of his house. He mounted Laramie, drawing the Colt with his right hand. The jolt started him to bleeding again. He called loudly in Cheyenne, "Dull Knife! I will meet you at the corral!"

As if his call were a signal, the guns flashed all around the house. He heard Red answer them, then the erratic fire of Pierre and Bull Montell. He rode hard for the corral, and somehow he made it.

The old Indian was on one of Dick's horses from the cavvy. He sat motionless, silent. Dick said, "You have a dozen horses. Why do you not go and leave us in peace?"

They faced each other in the moonlight. Dick held the gun on the pommel of the saddle where Dull Knife could see it. The chieftain had a rifle under his arm. Neither seemed to notice the other's weapon. Dull Knife said, "You are brave to come here alone. Little Wolf's young men are thirsty for blood."

"You'll never get them back to the Butte if they fight us. We can hold out until the troops come."

Dull Knife said wearily, "It has been a long way to get to this place. If this be the end. . . I am weary."

Dick said, "Listen to me. I held out twenty horses from the drive. They are hidden well. If you take them and go, you will have your chance."

"They are not enough," said Dull Knife.

"Very well," said Dick. "Do you wish to fight me, here and now, with honor?"

Dull Knife said slowly, "I think I know what my brother is thinking. He is not afraid to die, because he also is of the Cheyenne. . . . We could make sacrifice here, and both could die with honor. My men are around us, but they would not interfere. In the hills my people await, Gray Feather. To them I must go."

Dick said promptly, "Call off your men."

"The twenty horses?" asked Dull Knife.

Dick took a deep breath. He said sternly, "They were offered in good faith and you refused. Fight me now, or go!"

IT WAS a chance no other white man dared take. It put Dull Knife strictly on his honor. At a word, Dick would be shot down, the house attacked. Yet Dull Knife knew his dwindling manpower would be lessened by the fight which could gain nothing but the death of the hated whites.

The chief said, "The horses: we must have them."

"Little Wolf plundered the agency," said Dick. "You have my cavvy. Fight me, or leave!"

Dull Knife sat for a long moment. Little Wolf's men gave a final howling war-cry and surged towards the house. Dull Knife said, "I go, brother."

He gave a quick order and the men rose. They had been all about Dick. They opened the circle for him. He had one last glimpse of the gaunt, melancholy, stately figure of the great chieftain sitting his horse in the moonlight.

Laramie leaped into the back yard. The Cheyennes were afoot. One drew a blazing arrow to the haft, aiming at the roof Dick had fashioned with his own hands.

Dick put Laramie at the gallop. The Cheyenne tried to turn aside, amazed at this moonlit apparition. Dick fired. The Cheyenne screamed, turned and ran. The burning arrow broke beneath Laramie's hoofs and went out.

Laramie, frightened by the fire, leaped aside as a burst of fire directed against Dick went wild. Guns chattered inside the house. Little Wolf, a brawny, swift figure, jumped for the porch. The door swung open and Red lunged forth, belching lead from two guns.

Little Wolf turned and ducked. Bull Montell, at a window, shouted, aiming a too-hasty shot at the young chief. Dull Knife's deep baying call to retreat struck through a sudden incongruous silence.

Little Wolf turned and fired one shot. The window crashed, and Bull Montell's voice ended on a high, gasping note. A hole in his face was crimson with a spurt of blood. Yelling in triumph, Little Wolf turned and sped.

The Cheyenne were gone like ghosts in the night. Dick slid down at the porch, resting against Laramie, looking at Red.

"They're gone for good," said Dick. "They're gone to Crow Butte. The troops will come and something tells me Dull Knife is finished. But Little Wolf and the younger warriors and the stronger women and children will get through."

He was very weak. He allowed Red to help him. His horses were safe, the house was safe.

Mona and Wah Lee came with fresh bandages. He had lost quite a lot of blood, at that. He couldn't speak very clearly. He said, "The Cheyennes . . . never wanted to fight 'em. . . . They're very brave . . . very . . . honorable."

Red said, "You talked 'em out of it, didn't you?"

"Offered to fight him," said Dick. "The way they are— They're decent. I'm almost one of them and they had to either fight me . . . or leave me alone."

Red said, "I wouldn't of believed it."

"A lot you don't know . . . ol' redhead," Dick smiled. "Go get Banty. Bring back my herd. . . . You'll need a new mount, Red!"

THE tall man looked doubtfully at Mona. Wah Lee finished his bandaging and went away. Mona said, "Why don't you go, Red? They may have had trouble with—our—horses."

Red gulped. His handsome face was puzzled. He said, "Why, sure I'll go. Wah Lee c'n clean up here. Why, Mona, of course I'll go. . . You'll be waiting?"

She said, "No, Red." Her hand tightened on Dick's.

Red straightened. He bowed to Mona, stiffly, from the waist, in his most polished manner. He said, "I know when I have lost. . . . Perhaps I even am aware of what I have lost."

He put his hand over theirs, for a moment. He had never looked more romantic. "I'll bring back your horses and men, Dick. May God bless you both." He strode out, head erect.

Mona said, "Why—he enjoyed that! He loved it, making a martyr of himself, being brave—"

Her father limped in and surveyed them. He said with satisfaction, "That big actor. He's gone. I am glad that nonsense is over. I will send for glass to repair your windows, Dick. This is a fine house!"

He nodded, squinting at them. Then he went out to join Wah Lee. Dick held onto Mona, too weak to kiss her again. He was thinking of the tall, lean old Indian on the backtrail to Crow Butte. Far away a bugle wailed a faint note.

He said, "Listen! I sent them away in time. I gave them a chance, without meanin' to—but I'm glad! Some of them will gain freedom, I know it. Dull Knife will see to it."

Mona said, "Hush, darling. You're feverish."

But he saw it, as in a dream: Dull Knife sending the stronger ones ahead with the fresh mounts, remaining to fight a rear-guard action. Little Wolf escaping to old Sitting Bull. Dull Knife captured, escaped, suffering—but never going back to the south where Cheyennes could not live honorably and decently. . . .

THE END

# Rebels of Signal Valley

## By Rod Patterson

### CHAPTER ONE

**A Funeral Means Trouble!**

THE two cowpokes, sprawling in chairs on the gallery of the Sundown Hotel, watched the rider who came loping toward them across Alamitos' central square. They noticed the deft way he handled his fast-stepping claybank horse; and they knew he was a stranger by the keen scrutiny he gave the town. He was a tall man, broad and heavy-set, with high cheekbones pressing against the bronzed skin of a square, grave face. Stepping from the saddle, he permitted the horse to nose into the cast-iron water trough before tying it to the rack. Then he turned and addressed the two men on the gallery: "Maybe you gents can tell me the trail to Pop Tabor's Star-Cross spread?"

Billy Dunfree, stubble-bearded, gnarled as an oak, let his boots down from the railing and poked a rope-calloused finger under his hot, stiff collar. Both he and Seco Smith—a rawboned young man with a callow face and innocuous eyes—were dressed in their Sunday best, and not enjoying it.

Dunfree eyed the stranger suspiciously. "We're from Star-Cross. Did you say you was lookin' for a ridin' job?"

"I didn't say," the tall man answered good-naturedly.

Seco Smith put in, "Ain't nobody out at the ranch. They're all in for the buryin'."

**A Hard-Hitting Novel of Fighting Texans**

Jeff Tabor fired from the hip. . . .

**Hugh Cantrell was a cool, quick-thinking fighting man who'd never stick his head in a bear-trap if he could help it. . . . Yet, to side the man who damned him as both a coward and traitor, he pounded into a blazing gun-hell from which neither he nor his one-time pard could ever hope to return!**

"Buryin'?" The tall man's reddish eyebrows went up a notch. "Who's dead?"

"Pop is," Seco said laconically.

The stranger started, wiped the smile off his face. "Why, I didn't savvy Pop had been ailin' even."

"He was drygulched," Dunfree said flatly. "Shot plumb in the back down at Hondo Springs."

"That's two of Miss Edith's men-folks she's lost sudden-like," Seco Smith said. "Her brother Jeff was killed in a gunfight down Brazos way—a month ago."

"I heard about that," the pilgrim said casually. "Too bad."

Dunfree was bitter. "His pardner quit him in a pinch. Some hombre he got mustered outa the Army with. Jeff walked into a ruckus and they found his hat in the Brazos. If he didn't die from lead, he drowned like a rat."

"You don't wanta believe everything you hear," the man said in a flat tone. "There's two sides to every story, boys."

"Not to this un', there ain't," Dunfree said. "And I'd shore like to meet up with the *orejana* that let the kid walk head-first into a jag o' lead when he could've sided him."

SOUND lifted in the sultry air—the wheezing of a pump organ. The weird music seemed to come from up the street, and it automatically drew the stares of all three men.

Dunfree rose from his chair with a visible effort. "Time to go," he said resignedly. "That's Parson Joe Yenks startin' the service. He'll preach some over Pop, then we'll put him in boothill."

The two Star-Cross punchers let themselves

down to the cinder walk, and the stranger joined them. They moved up the street toward a 'dobe building that bore a faded sign:

LUKE FALLON
BARBER—UNDERTAKER

"Who salivated Pop?" the pilgrim asked in his mild voice.

Seco Smith spat into the dust. "Can't prove who done it, mister, but we got a hunch he ain't fur off from here!"

They came up to the 'dobe as the pump organ stopped its doleful wailing. The stranger went in at once, ducking his head out of habit, though the door was high enough to pass his erect frame with an inch or two to spare. Dunfree and Smith spat out their tobacco and tramped in softly after him.

The room was dim and smelled dank and cellary, the odor of a mud-walled building in summertime. Twenty or thirty men and women sat on benches here, friends and neighbors of the dead man. The pilgrim paused, looking at the girl who came toward him. He found himself staring down into hazel eyes, fringed by long lashes. The girl was in her early twenties, full-bodied and strikingly attractive in riding skirt and white shirtwaist. The shadow of tragedy had touched her delicately molded face.

"A friend of Dad's?" She shook hands like a man, gripping his hand with a brief but steady pressure. "He had so many friends I never even knew."

He held his hat and nodded soberly. "I'm Hugh Cantrell, ma'am."

"It was nice of you to come," she said, and showed him to an empty bench nearby.

He sat down with a murmured word of thanks. So this was Jeff Tabor's sister? She was even prettier than Jeff, in his cold, aloof way, had led him to believe. There certainly was no resemblance to remind him of the headstrong young Johnny Reb whose body now lay at the bottom of the Brazos, two hundred miles away. Cantrell looked around the room. A coffin rested on four chairs up front, and Parson Joe was standing near it, ready to begin his sermon. His first words, delivered in a sepulchral tone, matched the man's melancholy appearance; he had a flat, sad face, dish-like in its expressionlessness.

"Brethren and sisteren," the parson began, "y'all come hyar to pay respect to a honest, upstandin'-gent. Hyar he lies—kilt by a little chunk o' lead that let the daylight in, murdered by a sidewinder thet hid his face an' put no notches on his gun. Once, in the saddle Pop rid gay an' free—"

VOICES broke across the parson's words, cut sharply through the hot, stale air. They were men's voices, blusteringly lifted from the rear of the little hall. Cantrell heard Edith Tabor's outraged cry: "Get out of here, John Spain! Haven't you any respect for the dead at all?"

Cantrell stood up and gravitated slowly toward the door, observing the two men who suddenly stood blocked against the street's bright sunlight. One was tall, thick-set; the other rail-thin and runty. The big man was speaking, his heavy voice booming irascibly through the hall. "Ma'am, I warned your old man to take that bob-wire off Hondo Springs three days ago! Me and Benoit jest rode through and it's still there! There'll be trouble if you keep buckin' me!"

Amazement filled the hall with murmurs; heads turned; faces stared. Cantrell came up to the group at the door and faced the two intruders. He said, "What's all the hooraw about?"

The big man turned blockily. "Stand back, stranger! My business is with the Tabor crowd, not with you!"

Edith Tabor turned to Cantrell. "Mister Cantrell, please get these men to leave!"

Cantrell spoke unhurriedly, addressing himself to Spain. "Where's your manners, mister? This here's a private funeral. Come out on the street and I'll talk to you."

Spain said, "Reb, you better keep clear o' this!"

The man called Benoit presented a threatening thin face to Cantrell. His eyes were black and bright and his hand lay on the butt of his holstered gun. But Cantrell ignored him, acted simultaneously with Spain's harsh words. He placed his weight deliberately against both men, carrying them steadily backward, not jostling or pushing, but easing them out through the wide-open door into the street beyond. On the cinder walk Spain stopped, a wildness on his face. Benoit took a quick step forward, gun half out of the leather. There was violence in the move, but Cantrell quelled it with his quiet voice. "Watch it, fella. Don't get your bristles up till you got something to be sore about."

Then John Spain let his temper go. "Why, you damn' Reb, who you think you're shovin' around?"

Cantrell answered with an edge of malice, though the smile never left his square face. "A pair of proddy boys that figure they own the world."

Spain and Benoit checked themselves with an effort, measuring Cantrell, but not quite ready to challenge him outright. "Who the hell are you?" Spain blurted.

"You'll find out," said Cantrell. "Now about that barbed-wire, boys—"

Blood stormed into Spain's flat cheeks. "I was in a neighborhood cattle war once,"

he said, breathing laboredly. "It was bad."

The man, Cantrell guessed, had never been seriously crossed before; his temper had fed on easy victories in a land where men's will to resist aggression had been weakened by war. He held himself motionless, meeting Spain's angry stare unwaveringly. Spain said, "Tell that Tabor gal, unless she wants a fight on her hands, she better stay off my range and quit fencin' water off from my cows!" He flicked his gaze to Benoit and said, "Come on, Les!" and turned on his heel and walked away. Afterward, in the saddle, they swept back past Cantrell, and he caught the echo of John Spain's voice, though he didn't get the words.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Homecoming to Hell's Ranch

CANTRELL remained a thoughtful shape on the walk after Spain and Benoit had galloped out of town. At twenty-eight, he had seen little but trouble. The days of his life were like pages of a book, turned slowly one by one, each page a lesson to be learned by bitterness and pain.

Remembering young Jeff Tabor, he recalled the hate that had burned in Jeff's black eyes, the day they parted on the plains. The War Between the States had scarred them both, and their friendship had sprung full-grown from the first day they began working at Long Tom Carmody's big spread near Dragoon town. After fighting four years in Jeb Stuart's cavalry, they had headed back across the hot, dreary miles to Texas. Cantrell had gone first to the place where he was born, but Yankee carpet-baggers had been there before him, and he had moved on. Embittered by defeat, Jeff had not returned to his father's cattle ranch in West Texas, had ignored the frequent letters imploring him to come home.

Long Tom Carmody ran a gun outfit, and he had hired Jeff and Cantrell for their fighting experience. Jeff had signed eagerly, Cantrell with some remorse.

Carmody had sent Jeff and Cantrell with six other men to an outfit he coveted in a neighboring township. The mission had ended in a knock-down, drag-out gun-battle with the cowboys of the spread. Four men were killed, two by Jeff Tabor, and then Carmody's men were beaten off. Cantrell and Jeff left their group and rode two days to outdistance the posse which was pursuing them.

Some fifty miles from the scene of the fight, Cantrell and Jeff pulled up on a sunny morning, now a month ago. They had emerged from the hills where a river looped across open plains.

Cantrell was hopeful. "We can reach your father's spread in four more days if we ride hard. Then we'll be safe."

Jeff swung hard in the saddle, staring in surprise. "You mean," he said in his slow drawl, "we ain't goin' back for to collect our pay?"

Cantrell said deliberately, "Long Tom don't figure he owes us anything, Jeff. That's the trouble with ridin' gun for a man. You don't get paid if you don't win out. Me, I'm playin' it straight from here on."

Jeff's stubble of blue-black beard made his lean face look leaner, his hard eyes harder. "Look, friend," he snapped. "I'm ridin' back and I'll get paid or take it outa Carmody's hide!"

Cantrell's face was set in stubborn lines. "Then," he said doggedly, "you'll ride alone. My life's worth more'n eighty dollars Mex."

"I'm damned if you ain't yella!" Jeff exploded. "You got a yella streak as wide as the Rio Grande!"

Cantrell didn't change expression. "Your folks need you at home," he said. "The carpet-baggers're tryin' to push 'em off the ranch."

Jeff's mouth curled. "I'll see you in hell with your damn' back broke 'fore I ride there with you!"

Cantrell took it without a blink. "You're just a common killer, Jeff," he said quietly. "I've seen it comin', and I've tried to head it off. But some day you'll meet a man with a quicker eye and then you'll go down with a bullet in your gut. Remember how I warned you when you're kickin' in the dust!"

THAT was the way they had parted—under a glaring sun, far out on the big tan plain that swept like a limitless sea over the heave

**WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR**

**Twenty-five tons of blueprint paper go into the making of a battleship. Paper is needed for packing food, ammunition and medical supplies for the armed forces—and the shortage is acute. Don't burn or throw away newspapers, magazines, wrapping paper, cartons. . . .**

**SAVE IT . . . SORT IT . . . CALL YOUR COLLECTOR**

of the continent. And now Jeff Tabor was dead, shot down in a gun-duel with Carmody's rowdies after he had killed their boss. They had found Jeff's blood-stained hat and neckpiece at a ford on the Brazos, ten miles south of Dragoon town. Riddled with bullets, he had made a superhuman attempt to get away, but death had overtaken him and now he lay in the Brazos mud, a fighting man forgotten and unsung.

These were Hugh Cantrell's troubled thoughts as he turned and slowly made his way into Fallon's funeral hall, where Parson Joe was continuing his interrupted stream of oratory.

Now quiet came down on the town, and the sun struck down straight and hard on the cinder walks and shimmered on the street's thick dust.

Alamitos gave Pop Tabor the best farewell within its power. When the service was over at the town's boothill, Cantrell drew Edith aside.

"I'll drive you back to Star-Cross, if you'd like me to," he said.

She flashed him a grateful look. "That's kind of you."

Cantrell tied his claybank to the tailboard of the Concord buggy and took the lines. Dunfree and Smith watched all this, and something passed between them, but they mounted their ponies and fell in behind the buggy as it rolled on out of town.

It was a long time before Cantrell realized that the girl was waiting for him to talk, to tell her something about himself. When he was sure it wasn't just curiosity, he began to speak. He told her everything—everything, that is, except his friendship and break-up with her brother Jeff. That would have to wait until he knew her better.

After a while she warmed up a little, and told him of herself, of the worry and hardship she and her father had endured for so long. She finally got around to John Spain.

"He came a year ago," Edith explained. "And he's made trouble for us ever since—crowding us farther and farther back from the good graze and the water. Hondo Springs was our last stand, and I'm sure Dad was shot there by Spain or one of his men."

"What about the other ranchers?" Cantrell asked.

"They've tried to fight him, but he won't come out in the open. He's a murderer—a brutal, inhuman killer!"

STAR-CROSS RANCH sprawled over the side of a long slope at the western rim of Signal Valley, a region of grassy hills and deep-slashed draws dotted with mesquite and cedar and Spanish oak. The main house, built of sun-baked 'dobe, sat on a low bench, and below it squatted barns, corrals, the bunkhouse, and a scattering of sheds.

"I know it looks run-down," Edith apologized as they entered the ranch yard late that afternoon. "But we've had to shave everything to the bone to hold on to it."

"It's a good spread," Cantrell said sincerely. "Wouldn't mind workin' here at all. A man could do a lot with it, in time."

She looked at him levelly. "Hugh—do you mean that? I do need someone to run it for me—it takes a man. And I'm having trouble with the round-up hands Dad hired."

Cantrell looked at her. "Edith," he said after a moment's pause, "you've hired yourself a hand!"

They shook hands on it, Edith smiling as she said, "I can't pay much wages, but I'll gladly give you a share in the next round-up."

"Fair enough," he said.

They turned the team of duns and Cantrell's claybank over to Dunfree and Smith who had followed them in from town, and went up to the house. In the little office, Edith showed Cantrell the tally book and the ranch accounts. "We've about two thousand head, but most of the herd is scattered all through these hills. And I'm afraid we'll have trouble with John Spain if we try to scratch them up anywhere on his grass."

"I reckon not," said Cantrell. "You can cut anybody's herd at round-up time."

"You don't know John Spain."

"I aim," he said, "to cultivate the gent."

Cantrell's gaze fell on a tintype on Edith's desk. She saw his narrowed glance, said, "That's my brother Jeff. He was killed in a gunfight."

"I heard about it," he answered uncomfortably.

"His pardner ran out on him," she said, "left him to stand up against a gang of blackleg cowmen."

He started to protest, but never spoke the words. He couldn't tell her about Jeff yet; he had to wait till the sign was right.

"Where did you meet my father, Hugh?" she asked in a softer tone.

"I didn't exactly know him," Cantrell said evasively. "But anybody that's ever been to Abilene or Dodge knows about the big trail-herds Pop used to run."

They talked on for a while, then went down to the corrals together. Coming up toward the hay barn, they saw the four cowboys who were hunkered down against the bunkhouse wall, smoking and talking idly. One of the men, a solid, well-built fellow, rose and walked toward them. There was something hostile in the expression of his blunt-boned face and hard, small eyes.

Edith said, "Riker, this is our new foreman—Hugh Cantrell." She indicated the three men squatting against the bunkhouse wall. "Hugh, meet Cherokee, and Bodie and Rob Green."

Cantrell nodded, not speaking. Riker stood a pace or two away, his face expressionless. "Why ain't you boys workin'?" Cantrell asked him. "Or maybe you figure this spread is a rest-cure?"

Riker's eyes turned surly. "Ain't no sense ridin' in the hot sun for a few lousy strays," he growled.

"Get busy," Cantrell ordered. "And don't let me see you dallyin' again."

THE three men against the wall rose sullenly, scuffing their feet in the dust. The man called Cherokee, tall and thick-bodied, said, "We work better, mister, if we ain't pushed too hard."

"Get busy," Cantrell told them curtly, "or clear out!"

Riker said gruffly, "What this spread needs is a strawboss that ain't a slave-driver."

"Yeah," Bodie Green chimed in. "Yuh should've give Riker the job, ma'am."

"I was afraid I'd made a mistake in keeping you men on," Edith said, holding her anger in check. "Billy and Seco saw you talking to John Spain in town last week. Maybe you'd work better for him."

"We like it here," Riker said. "Your chuck's good and the bunks is plumb soft for sleepin'."

Cantrell's jaw hardened. "You're fired—the mangy four of you! Pick up your gear and git!"

"Don't be in no hurry," Riker sneered. "You ain't big enough around the belt to throw us off this ranch!"

It happened suddenly. The three men against the wall moved out into the sunlight. Cantrell walked forward to meet them, moving loosely, negligently. And then he no longer sauntered. With piston-like swiftness, he whipped a fist into Riker's face, and swung to the right, clipping a second blow to Cherokee's chin. Cherokee went down, sprawling in the dust.

Bodie and Rob Green brought up, staring at the suddenness with which the whirlwind had struck in their midst. Bodie went popeyed trying to duck Cantrell's fist, but caught it on the right ear and toppled backward. Rob swung hard—missed. His jaw was thrust out when Cantrell chopped him twice, battering him to his knees. He fell sideways and did not move again.

Then Edith called a warning as Riker lunged up and sprang for Cantrell's back. Cantrell jerked forward, jackknifing the big man clean over his head, then turned like a cat and caught Cherokee, who had come to his feet, squarely in the temple. The man dropped like a pole-axed steer.

Cantrell straightened, rubbing a bruised hand in a cupped palm. "Sorry," he murmured, "for puttin' on a three-ring rodeo."

"But—" the girl stammered— "they might have beaten you, Hugh. Why didn't you draw down on them?"

Cantrell looked at her, and his smile broadened out along his mouth, the warp of his upper lip across his hard white teeth giving him a wry expression. "Edith, I put in four years killin' people with a gun, and it never agreed with me."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Barbed-Wire Won't Stop Bullets

AFTER supper, Cantrell saddled his claybank and rode southward into the hills. Dunfree and Smith had offered to ride along, but Cantrell told them he preferred to make his first inspection of the nearby range alone.

John Spain's threat to cut the barbed-wire at Hondo Springs did not worry him, even though he was sure the four discharged rannies had headed on a bee-line for Big Bit to make their report to Spain. Cantrell's whole life had been geared to a definite pace, and nothing could make him break his habits.

Cantrell passed over Star-Cross grass and through the low red hills to the southeast, following the course of a dry stream that formed the boundary of Big Bit. He reached a point from which he could view the open range as it rolled on southward toward the black bulk of the Medicine Bow Mountains. All along this distance he had observed Star-Cross cattle grazing, and he had even taken time to scout that beef before darkness came down. He had found some of John Spain's beef, which was natural.

Night came swiftly out here on the plain; a thin sliver of moon tipped over the hills. Cantrell crossed a wooded rise, eased the claybank down into a narrow tongue of mesquite flats, then climbed a higher ridge, passing through its timber and emerging on a long stretch of rimrock. Below, about a quarter of a mile away, the red eye of a single campfire showed against the black shadows. He could see the blocked-out forms of several men moving back and forth before the flames. That would be one of John Spain's line camps. He put the horse down the slope toward it.

As he rode cautiously into the fanned-out circle of firelight, five men stood up suddenly. Cantrell singled out the thick-set shape of John Spain himself.

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Cantrell held his horse in with one hand, raising the other in a casual salute. "Howdy, boys."

Spain said, "What d'you want, Cantrell?"

"Rode down to make a deal."

The big man grinned slightly. "Hondo Springs?"

"Yes," said Cantrell. "We'll allow you to water your cows there till the dry spell's over with."

Spain gave a hard laugh. "It's no deal, Cantrell. Old Man Tabor never did file proper on the Springs. I'm movin' in and takin' title, and your wire comes down."

Cantrell said flatly, "We don't want trouble, Spain, but we'll fight you in circuit court—"

"Court be damned!" Contempt edged the rancher's voice. "There ain't no law for Johnny Rebs!"

"It's up to you to start the fight," Cantrell countered. "But you better think about it good before you do."

"Ride on!" Spain said noisily. "You're on my grass!"

Cantrell spoke softly, "I been lookin' over your range, Spain. Our beef's eatin' all over this country. Round-up's two weeks off, and that's the time when outfits drive their cattle back to their own range."

"Not from the Big Bit, they don't," said the big man coldly. "Anything grazin' on my side o' the line I consider maverick stuff."

Cantrell studied him a moment. "All right, Spain." He pulled his horse around. "Just the same, we aim to collect Star-Cross beef wherever we find it, and we'll follow its tracks if it takes us right into your own backyard." He moved off slowly into the thick curtain of darkness that held the plain.

EDITH didn't ask Cantrell many questions next morning. She seemed to sense that he had a plan, and was willing he should work it out without interference from her. She smiled when Billy Dunfree got her aside and said, "Can't figure this hombre out nohow. He won't listen to Seco and me—he's as independent as a hog on ice!"

"Never mind, Billy." She had a faraway look in her hazel eyes as she said it. She wasn't helpless, but she was tired and lonely. It was good to have a man run things for her; and Hugh Cantrell had a quality of self-assurance that inspired confidence a woman beset by worry and grief.

Cantrell took over the running of the ranch from that day on, making repairs to the barns and outbuildings, constructing a new and larger holding corral. Toward the middle of the week he rode to three neighboring ranches to arrange for the joint round-up now only

ten days off. He even went to town to make a delivery contract with the cattle buyer who had set up his headquarters in the Sundown Hotel.

He had been on the job a bit over a week when he sat at supper one evening with Edith and the two cowboys and said casually, "I've hired three Mexicans to give us a hand in the round-up. They start day after tomorrow."

Edith gasped. "But, Hugh, John Spain's sure to make trouble if he hears that! They say he shot two Mexican squatters that filed a claim in the Yellow Hills!"

"Nobody has any right to bar Mex hands," Cantrell said brusquely. "And what we do is none of Spain's affair. The war's over and all men are the same."

"No," the girl argued, "it's not over. It's still going on in Texas. That's why we're having trouble with men like Spain, and there'll be no peace until *all* the outlaws are driven out!"

"We'll let the law handle things."

She stared at him, and Dunfree and Smith looked blankly at their boss. "Law?" Edith said impatiently. "The peace officer at Alamitos is a Northerner—a carpet-bagger! He's as bad as John Spain himself!"

But Cantrell laughed it off. After the meal, he walked out on the ranch gallery with the girl and sat on the bench tucked back against honeysuckle vines. Suddenly he turned and took her hand. "I—I've got to tell you something, Edith. And it's goin' to be doggoned hard to do."

Her eyes seemed to grow darker as she turned them up to him. She put both her hands in his. They were cold, he realized, and he warmed them in his own strong grip. Suddenly, almost before he knew it himself, he had pulled her against him and was kissing her.

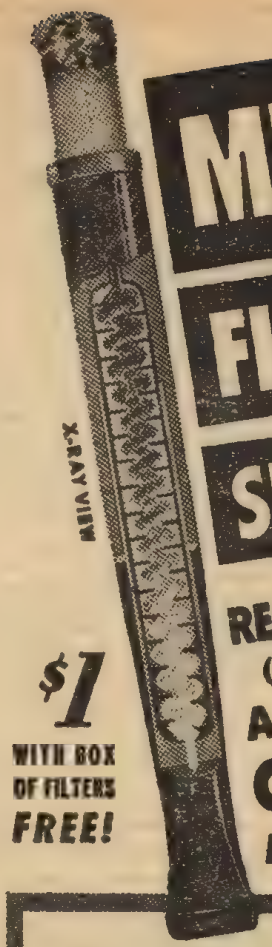
"Is that what you wanted to—tell me?" she whispered finally.

"Yes," he lied, and swallowed hard. "That was it."

A shyness seemed to cover her. "You—told it very nicely, Hugh."

THE next day, Cantrell took Dunfree and Smith and rode southward toward Hondo Springs through the morning's growing heat. They covered the six miles before nine o'clock. The Springs lay in a kind of green oasis in a desert of tan-colored grass. As the three men reined up on a hill overlooking the watering place, they saw that the barbed-wire had been cut in a dozen places, and the catch-basin had been trampled into a boghole.

"By thunder," Dunfree ejaculated, "I tol' you Spain would keep his word, Cantrell! Now look at it! Tromped plumb to hell and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the next water twenty mile east o' here!"

"I say we oughta watch the Springs," Seco Smith said with a rancorous look at Cantrell, "and plug ev'ry critter—four legged or two—that tries to use the water!"

"Take it easy," Cantrell said softly. "We'll see about this later. Now we got to scout up some of our strays before the big push starts."

Both men stared at him. Distrust and suspicion marked their deep-lined faces. But they did not speak again. They followed Cantrell as he swung off toward the south in the direction of Big Bit range. As they rode, Cantrell scanned the land, watching for Star-Cross steers. But where he had seen large numbers of Tabor animals a little over a week before, now only a few scattered bunches showed.

They struck west after a while, traveling downgrade toward the valley plain. A little while later, far out on the dun-colored prairie, they saw a considerable number of cattle; five miles beyond stood the dim low-lying buildings of Big Bit Ranch. Cantrell pulled up. Dunfree and Smith watched him covertly, waiting for him to speak, waiting to see what he would do now. Cantrell stared at the grazing cattle a moment. "Dunfree, take that left bunch and start cuttin' for Star-Cross cows. Me and Seco'll take that bunch on the right. Work fast, but watch your brands. We don't wanta get mixed up in a rustlin' charge."

"Mebbe," Dunfree said sarcastically, "you figure John Spain's jest playin' tiddledy-winks when he jumps our cows." His temper was short and his nerves wound up. "I'm for a shoot-out with Big Bit, and grabbin' our cows without all this pussy-footin'."

"There'll be no gunplay," said Cantrell, flatly, "unless Spain starts it himself."

THE three men rode swiftly down the grade, Dunfree heading left, Cantrell and Smith to the right. Dust lifted from the grass, making a clear signal to any riders at Big Bit or on the high ground in back of them. They were turning in and out of the beef now, spotting Star-Cross cows, cutting them out rapidly and throwing them north across the prairie. They had a bunch of some thirty steers on the trot when Smith cried, "Here comes your fun, Cantrell," and pointed westward.

"We'll have to fight for this bunch," Dunfree said joyfully, riding up beside Cantrell.

"Mind what I told you," Cantrell snapped. "No firin'. That's an order, boys."

"What's'a matter, mister?" Seco Smith sneered. "You afeered o' usin' your gun?"

Cantrell ignored the jibe. They crossed a

ridge, shagging the cattle ahead of them. A dust cloud moved out of the grass, and presently the black moving point of a group of riders appeared, growing larger as the moments passed. "Stand fast," Cantrell said, and reined his claybank up.

There were six horsemen in the party that stopped in front of them. John Spain was in the lead. Behind him sat Les Benoit—and behind Benoit, fanned out in a half-circle, were the four rannies Cantrell had fired off Star-Cross; Riker, Cherokee, and Bodie and Rob Green.

John Spain's face was dark with anger. "Get off my range!" he said. "All of you start ridin' for timber! The next time I catch you on Big Bit you'll be three thieves swingin' on a rope!"

Cantrell had his hands hooked loosely around his saddle horn. His boots were thrust into the stirrups, his legs straight down beside his horse's flanks. He stared at Spain from under his wide hat-brim, and said, "This is our beef, Spain. If you take it back, *you'll* be the rustler."

"Ride out!" Spain shouted in a strangled tone. "Ride out!"

Les Benoit had a Winchester canted across his pommel, and now its breechlock clicked sharply on the silence that followed Spain's outburst. The four men in back of him drew their guns as if the sound were a signal.

Cantrell saw the creep of desire in the slitted eyes of all these grim-faced men. They were spoiling for a fight, would be disappointed if they didn't get it now. But Spain's order to shoot did not come.

Cantrell motioned to Dunfree and Smith. "Leave the cattle where they are," he said, and turned his horse and sent it swiftly out across the plain. The two Star-Cross punchers neck-reined their ponies and followed Cantrell at a trot, their faces bleak with inner rage.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Too Big for Boothill

WHEN CANTRELL reached Star-Cross after the meeting with Big Bit, the wind which blew perpetually over Signal Valley had stopped for once; not a breath stirred. Thick layers of air piled up over the land were hot as molten glass.

Cantrell tied his claybank at the hitchrail in front of the ranch house and stood a moment, considering what he would say to Edith. Whatever law remained in this country must be made to work for honest men. Now was the time to ride to Alamitos and lay his evi-

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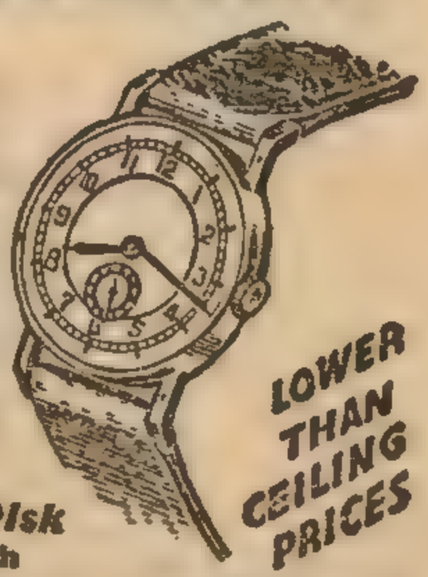

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dence against Spain in front of the peace officer. If the lawman declined to act, Cantrell would rouse up the neighboring ranchers and bring pressure to bear. Cantrell felt certain he could accumulate sufficient power among the Oakleys, the McConnells and the Benteens to hog-tie Big Bit before Spain succeeded in his plan to pirate Valley beef and Valley grass.

And there was another matter. . . . For days now he had thought about telling Edith the truth—the truth about his argument and break-up with her brother Jeff. He must not postpone it any longer, for the longer he waited, the harder it grew to tell her.

Voices, low and murmuring, drifted to him from the ranch office as Cantrell entered the house. As he swung along the hall, Edith's voice said, "I'm so happy. It's been like a nightmare to me." The rest of it faded out to silence as Cantrell knocked at the door and opened it. He checked himself, blinking.

And then he made out the high-shouldered form of a man—saw Edith Tabor standing close to him, arms clasped around his narrow waist, her face buried against his chest. For the space of a long-drawn breath, Cantrell paused in the open doorway, staring unbelievingly. For the man had turned half around at the sound of his tread, and now Cantrell saw the close-cropped beard, the cold hard eyes—Jeff Tabor!

BREATH ran slowly out of Cantrell's lungs; the world crashed down around his ears in tangled ruin. At the same moment, Jeff Tabor saw the man in the doorway, and tensed. Edith felt that tremor run through her brother's lanky frame, lifted her head and looked toward the door. The glimmer of close-held tears lay in her hazel eyes, and she brushed a hand over her cheeks, a smile playing tremulously along her full-lipped mouth. "Well, Jeff—" she gripped her brother by the arm—"this is Hugh Cantrell. He fought with General Stuart, too. Isn't it queer you two never met before?"

Jeff Tabor never moved. Only his eyes changed; the flat lids came down slowly, shutting out the hate that flamed suddenly in those cold orbs. He walked a pace forward—with a noticeable limp—and held out his hand. "Howdy, Cantrell." Then, to the girl: "Nuthin' queer about that, Edie. Jeb's outfit was pretty big."

Cantrell's eyes were narrowed and bullet-blue. He returned the swift pressure of Jeff's hand, then let his arm fall slack. "We—heard you'd been killed," he managed to get out. "Never figured to see you alive again."

Jeff's laugh was like breaking ice. "Too

big for boothill, Cantrell. They punctured my hide some, but I made up my mind I wouldn't cash in my chips yet. Got a score I wanta settle 'fore I die."

"I savvy what you mean," Cantrell said, tight-lipped.

Edith spoke quickly, excitedly: "We both know what you mean, Jeff. And I'll help you square it. Who is he?"

Jeff held his gaze on Cantrell's stiff-set face. "If I need any help, Edie, I can call on Cantrell. Hey, Cantrell?"

Cantrell nodded, not speaking, but steadily meeting the other's icy glance.

"Knew you'd feel thataway," said Jeff.

"Why not tell us his name?" Cantrell asked evenly.

"Never call my shots. You'll know when I'm ready," Jeff said. He turned abruptly, went over to the desk and sat down, blowing out a long breath of relief. "Gosh, Sis, the old place sure looks good to me. Been over four years since I set foot on it." He looked at the girl, adding, "Now about Pop. I heard about him down at Injun Wells. Who shot him—that Spain hombre you wrote me about?"

Fear etched itself on Edith's face. She caught her breath. "We—can't be sure, Jeff. We found him between here and Hondo Springs, but we can't prove—"

"You've had trouble with this Big Bit outfit," Jeff answered in his cold voice. "I've heard all about John Spain. He's a Yank."

Edith moved against the desk, leaning tensely over it. "Jeff, don't start anything with Big Bit. Not yet. Not till we get some sort of proof. I—couldn't bear it if I lost you now—" Her voice broke on a sob, and she couldn't finish.

JEFF reached over and patted her hand, though there was little gentleness in the gesture. "Edie, I'm surprised at you. That ain't no way for a Tabor to go on. I aim to clean this Big Bit outfit up afore I'm here a week!"

Edith straightened, a look of resignation on her face. She said, "I'll get you something to eat. You two boys can talk it out." And then she was gone, hurrying toward the kitchen in the east wing of the house.

Jeff Tabor waited until Edith was out of earshot, then pinned Cantrell with his scornful gaze. "All right," he said, "now you better start talkin', mister. Why didn't you tell her you was the yella dog ran out on me?"

Cantrell took the insult unflinchingly. He met Jeff's deliberate, hateful stare, his own look tightening visibly. "I didn't tell her anything because she's been too worried to

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stand another shock. Someday I figured to tell her—tell her you're a cat-eyed killer on the loose!"

Jeff's laugh was a jarring sound in the silent room. "Well, she's fell for you, I see! But you'll never get her. I'd drill you first!"

AFTER an early breakfast the next morning, Jeff came down to the corrals where Cantrell and Dunfree and Smith were mending a break in the corral fence. The three Mexican cowhands had arrived shortly after dawn, but Jeff had deliberately overridden Cantrell's authority, had dismissed the men before they could start to work.

Now Jeff stared at Cantrell, said, "Saddle me a horse. I'm goin' to take a look at Spain's round-up."

Ten minutes later Jeff was in the saddle and loping southward into the morning's thick heat-haze. Cantrell paced toward the bunkhouse where he had moved his things the night before. He met Edith coming down the path. "Hugh, what on earth's gone wrong?" the girl asked worriedly. "You and Jeff behave as though you were ready to fly at each other's throats!"

Cantrell shrugged, avoiding her searching gaze. "Nothin's wrong, Edith. Jeff's a bit proddy, but he's been through a lot."

She turned away, her smooth forehead still marked by a worried frown. Cantrell stood a moment, staring after her, and he knew that it was Edith alone who held him here at Star-Cross. In that moment he hated the stubborn, gun-crazy man who had come back from boothill to turn Signal Valley into a bloody battleground.

Jeff Tabor returned to the ranch at ten o'clock that morning. Cantrell had saddled up his claybank and Dunfree and Smith were already mounted and ready to ride with him.

Jeff stopped his bay horse with a savage jerk on the curb bit, sliding the sweat-streaked animal right up to the corral, nearly crashing into the rails. He snarled at them, "What the hell are you settin' around for? Spain's movin' a trail-herd up the valley! Come on!"

Cantrell hesitated, one boot lifted to the stirrup. He stared bleakly over his shoulder. "You mean you're goin' to cut that herd?"

"Cantrell, you catch on quick!"

Dunfree and Smith pulled their horses around so they could watch Cantrell's face. "Jeff, don't do it," Cantrell said flatly. "Let the law handle this."

Jeff held his horse in with one hand, flattened the other in front of him. "To hell with the law!" he yelled. "If you're afraid to ride with us, stay here with Edith!"

This, Cantrell knew, was the moment Jeff

Tabor had been waiting for. He stared at Jeff. He stepped to the saddle, said, "All right, you win!" and hit the claybank with his spurs.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Kill Once, Kill Twice!

THE four men struck southward in the general direction of Big Bit. A mile or so out of Star-Cross, Jeff rode up beside Cantrell, and the sardonic grin on his bearded face stung Cantrell to the quick.

Directly behind rode Billy Dunfree and Seco Smith, all grins at the prospect of action. From the vantage of a high ridge, they finally saw a haze of dust—perhaps seven or eight miles distant—a steadily moving mass of cattle on the faceless plain. When they reached the next ridge, the herd was closer, a long file stretching away to the north—a pounding red column of dust and hides and the hazy shapes of many horsemen.

This was no job for four men, Cantrell thought bitterly. At least twenty riders were driving that trail-herd.

Suddenly, out of the mesquite, a rider burst into view. It was one of the Slash-Bar cowboys, a man from the outfit adjoining Star-Cross on the east. The man trotted up as the Star-Cross party stopped. Cantrell said, "Hello, Sam. You see what we see?"

"Sure do," the man exclaimed, scrubbing a hand over his reddish chin and staring out of grim gray eyes. "I been in close, countin' brands in John Spain's herd. He's pullin' the biggest steal this country's ever seen! D-Diamond, Slash-Bar, Star-Cross and Two Pines—Spain's got about every brand in the valley in that herd!"

Jeff Tabor said angrily, "He won't have 'em long! We're goin' to bust that outfit plumb to hell!"

Cantrell spurred forward again. "You damn fool," he shouted over the clatter of hoofs, "it'll be sure suicide to ride in against Spain's crew! There's twenty men and every one of 'em's spoilin' for a fight!"

But Jeff was riding on, his roan bearing him toward the distant herd at a long lope.

Suddenly Jeff spurred his horse up and over the crest of the ridge, then down a steep slope in a shower of rocks and dirt. Cantrell crowded the three men close, but holding his claybank in with a tight check-rein. They rode in and out of a stand of stunted post-oaks, breaking finally into the open plain.

There were five riders in sight, all masked by bandanas to protect their faces from the choking dust—three at the point of the herd,

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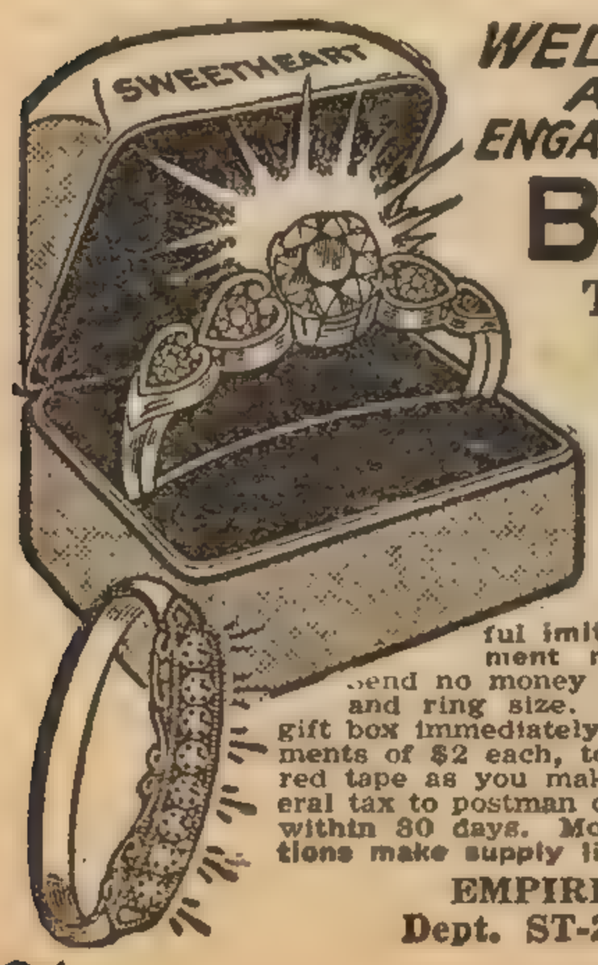


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one at either side of the cattle, a little way back. The two on the near side of the cattle pulled up, yelling and pointing.

Jeff Tabor motioned to Dunfree and Smith. "Spread out and stop the cows, you boys! I'll go find Spain!"

One of the riders, back on the flank, yelled and kicked spurs against his gray horse, wheeling it back down the line. Cantrell heard another shout, and another rider was coming up there, half-hidden by the dust.

A voice on Cantrell's right called, "Who are you and what d'you want?"

Cantrell watched the man and kept on relentlessly. "We're lookin' for John Spain."

The rider said, "That's him comin' up yonder," and indicated the man who was approaching from down the line. "What's your business, friend?"

Cantrell's answer was to ride faster, after Jeff. He risked a swift glance backward. Dunfree and Smith had pulled out in front of the point, fanning their hats, waving the lead steers down.

Cantrell steadily scanned the scene, smelling the dust, hearing the harsh bellowing of the herd, seeing those vague shapes ride up from the drag—waiting for the first long crash of rifles and sixguns that was sure to come. John Spain was close now—only about a hundred feet from the advancing shape of Jeff Tabor—and suddenly he reined his pony down. Cantrell could see his teeth gleam as he pulled his neckpiece down to shout, "Call off your men, Tabor! This herd is goin' through!"

CANTRELL flicked his gaze to the rear. Dunfree and Smith were sitting their ponies where they had been a moment before. The leaders of the herd had stopped, heads lowered, bawling, sniffing suspiciously. The Big Bit flank and point riders had fallen back a little way, undecided.

Jeff Tabor had slowed his bay to a walk, and then he halted it abruptly. John Spain cried, "Move aside, Tabor, or I'll give the word to blast you off the earth!"

Jeff was a stiff, high shape in the saddle. He said flatly, "Spain, you killed my old man—shot him in the back. I'm givin' you a better break!"

Spain sat as still as a statue. He did not speak or stir, but waited out the long seconds, waited for Jeff to make a move. Now other riders were galloping up along the shifting edge of the herd; the hoofs of their ponies punched dull echoes out of the chopped-up earth. The men swept in closer.

Now Spain's rowdies were slowly fanning out behind him. The sunlight lay garish over

the sparse mesquite; it glinted on rifle-barrels and bridle trappings, shone palely on the silver dust that drifted like metallic powder all around.

Then it happened. Jeff Tabor hitched sideways in his saddle, curved a palm aroumd the butt of his gun. He roweled his bay cruelly, fired from the hip—fired through the open toe of his low-slung holster, swiveling the weapon deftly upward on its long brass rivet.

Spain flinched back in the saddle as the bullet screamed an inch from his head. He drew his right-hand gun, angled it across his chest and blazed away at Jeff. Once—twice — Jeff Tabor stiffened in the stirrups. He stood there, arms lifted a little, the gun half out of its holster, and then he fell backward from his horse, striking the dust so hard he bounced.

At the same instant the riders behind John Spain opened up. Guns began to wink through the dust-haze.

One slug whipped through Cantrell's shirt between his left arm and his ribs, nicking him slightly. He fired three times, pulling the hammer back and letting it fall again. A horse went down, throwing its rider to the dust.

John Spain rushed back along the flank of the herd, but a shot from Cantrell's revolver tumbled his horse to its knees. The rancher went over its head in a long crashing fall. He landed on his hands and knees.

A rider roared up on his left, and he had to swing aside to avoid a head-on collision. He took snap aim and knocked the rider to the ground. It was Riker who lay kicking his life out in the dust.

NOW yells broke out from the point of the herd. Cattle bawled and milled. Horns clashed; hoofs and guns poured thunder all across the hills. Cantrell jerked his horse around, searching the ground for John Spain's bulky frame. But the Big Bit owner had disappeared. Cantrell spurred forward, firing.

Cantrell became aware of Billy Dunfree riding at his side. The old man's stringy body was swinging freely in the saddle as he punched lead at Big Bit, and his stubble-bearded face was lit with savage joy. He yelled, "Cantrell, you can fight! We had you figured wrong!" He rammed his knees into his pony's flanks. "Where's Jeff at?"

"Spain got him," Cantrell threw back, his sixgun kicking hard in a rock-like fist. "I think he's dead."

They rode forward, constantly swinging their horses. Dunfree was swearing like a trooper and using his rifle now. Then Cantrell spotted the burly form of John Spain.


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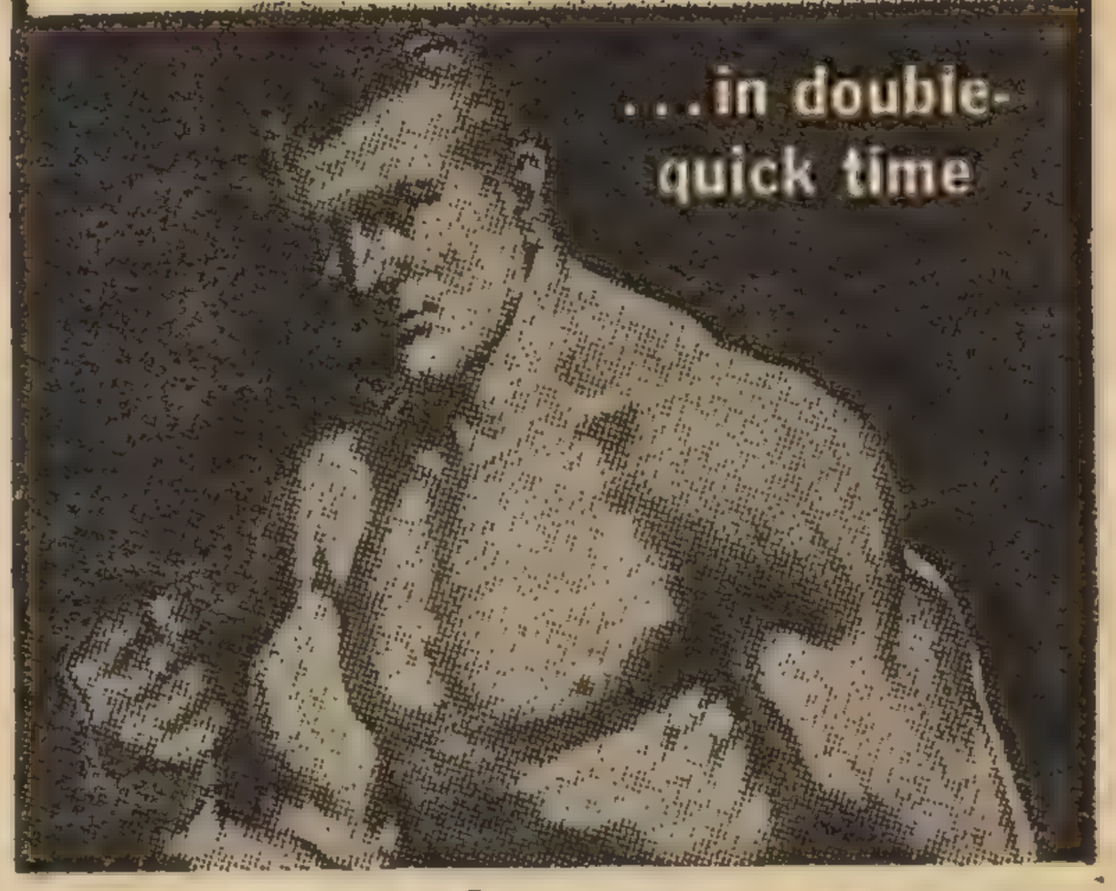


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The Big Bit owner was running for a riderless horse near the edge of the herd, trying to grab its trailing reins as the beast reared past. Cantrell rode him down, calling, "Hold it, Spain!"

Spain pulled around, a frenzy of rage twisting his dust-streaked face. Both of his guns were out, swinging upward, hammering their thunder through the stifling air.

One of the bullets slapped Cantrell's saddle; the other ripped through his jeans. He felt a stinging sensation above his right knee, and knew that he was hit. Then he triggered three swift shots. All three slugs hit home.

Cantrell pulled his horse around, seeing Billy Dunfree in the middle of a dogfight twenty feet away. Cantrell rammed the claybank into the thick of it, blazing away, clubbing at men's heads with the barrel of his revolver when the hammer fell on an empty shell.

Suddenly, startlingly, Big Bit began fading back toward the drag of the herd. Cantrell heard a rattle of fresh shots yonder at the thickening point; but they ceased suddenly. Then riders were pounding by—Slash-Bar—D-Diamond, Two Pines boys—swinging Winchesters and pistols and howling like banshees. These were led by Seco Smith, whose high-riding shape went by like a gray and bloody ghost. Smith's yell came floating back above the racket of the herd. "We'll git the rest, Cantrell, we'll give 'em hell!"

JEFF TABOR had been hard hit, but he was not dead when they picked him up and bore him back to Star-Cross Ranch that afternoon. Feverish, he opened his eyes and stared around his room. All afternoon he had vaguely heard horses coming and going around the corrals, horses ridden hard. Something was happening in Signal Valley.

Once Hugh Cantrell came into the bedroom, glanced at Jeff and growled, "You still alive? Be damned if you ain't a indestructable cuss!"

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Jeff pushed a grin to his pale lips. "Guntippers die twice, you old war-hoss! But this ain't my day to go hoppin' for a harp!" The effort of speaking took all his strength, and he sank back exhausted on his pillow.

Later Billy Dunfree and Seco Smith stole in, and Billy said, "Hell, Jeff, we doped Cantrell for a quitter! Why, that hombre's a ring-tailed, blue-eyed bat on wheels!"

Nightfall came, and hoofs still drummed in the ranch yard at regular intervals. Sometimes Edith sat on the edge of the bed, and spoon-fed him mush and soup. She was calm at last, but refused to tell him what was going on.

At nine o'clock that night Cantrell came clanking into the bedroom, spurs lifting music from the rough pine floor. He did not look at Jeff. "Well, it's done, Edie! We've cleaned the valley up, and we've got the marshal behind us now!"

Edith looked up, eyes round and wide and filled with thankfulness. "Thank God!" she breathed. Then, "Hugh, did you find out who started it?"

Cantrell put his hard gaze on Jeff's gray face. "Yes," he said shortly. "It was some hombre that tackled Spain's crew like a crazy man—went hog-wild with a gun and risked gettin' his friends killed for his foolishness!"

Jeff's lips were white against the grayness of his face. "Look, Cantrell . . . What about Spain, and the rest—"

"All dead," Cantrell said without emotion. "Benoit, Riker—the whole outfit."

Edith spoke then, her voice so low Cantrell could scarcely hear. "And now we'll have peace again. . . . no more killing. . . ."

Cantrell reached out, drew her upright, held her close.

There was a long silence. Then Jeff Tabor broke it, speaking in a tone that was almost fierce. "Peace—no more killin'. . . ." He lay motionless for a moment, then said in a stronger voice: "I knew a man once. He was a fightin' fool. But I called him a coward—I done him wrong. He used to say, 'There's no such thing as killin' once.' He used to say, 'Killin's a disease that gets in a man's blood and eats his soul.'

"This hombre fought with Stuart, same as me," Jeff went on, very softly. "And I know he was right about everything except that a killer can't be cured. Cantrell, who was that man? What was his name?"

The house was silent under the first faint buffeting of a rising wind. Cantrell grinned down into Edith's wondering eyes. "I never heard of him," he said to Jeff. He paused, then added mildly, "You're off your head a bit, old hoss, but you'll come out all right."

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- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steel Mill Workers
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Welding, Gas and Electric

**Radio School**
- ☐ Electronics ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing

**Railroad School**
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

**Steam Engineering Schools**
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engines
- ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Steam Engines

**Textile School**
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

**Business and Academic Schools**
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ City Letter Carrier
- ☐ College Preparatory
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Post Office Clerk
- ☐ Railway Postal Clerk
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

**Language School**
- ☐ Spanish ☐ French
- ☐ Good English

*Name*.....*Age*.....*Home Address*.....

*City*.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....*Working Hours*.....

*Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.*
*British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England.*

SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

*Heres the Greatest* **BILLFOLD BARGAIN** *in all America!*

# 3 BIG VALUES in ONE

*All for only* **$1.98**

- ★ **This Smart Leather Billfold and Pass Case**
- ★ **Your Choice of Emblems and Name Engraved on the Billfold in 23k GOLD**
- ★ **3-Color Identification Plate**
  **Beautifully Engraved with your Name, Address and Social Security Number**

**YOU GET THIS!** Smart looking, beautifully styled Leather Billfold with Pass Case to hold membership and credit cards. Patented snap feature locks securely so currency and valuables can't fall out.

Your Permanent Engraved Identification Tag.

● Rising Costs of Leather Goods may make it impossible to repeat this amazing offer!

## *De Luxe* VALUE — *Smart Leather* BILLFOLD

## Your Favorite Emblem, Name, Address and Social Security Number . . . *Engraved* IN GOLD! . . All At This One LOW PRICE

**YOU GET THIS!** Your choice of Emblems and your Name richly Engraved in 23 k Gold on the Face of the Billfold. Your name is also engraved in Gold, inside the Billfold.

Here, without a doubt, is the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that you'll be likely to see for a good many years to come. Through a fortunate purchase we have a limited quantity of these smart leather Billfolds available at this low price. If you have *shopped around*, you know that it is virtually impossible to get a good leather Billfold of this type beautifully engraved in gold with your Lodge Emblem or Army, Navy, Marine or Air Corps Insignia and Name at this sensational low price. In addition we also send you a specially designed 3-color Emergency Identification Plate, on which we engrave your Social Security Number, your Name and your Address. This smart Leather Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated. Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has 4 pockets each protected by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards. This handsome Billfold has the sturdy appearance and style usually found in costlier Billfolds.

● Due to difficulty in obtaining good leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember, you get **3 Big Values for only $1.98.** So rush your order today! If after receiving your Engraved Billfold, you don't positively agree that this is **the most outstanding bargain you ever came across, return it and we'll refund the money.**

**YOU GET THIS!** A beautiful 3-color Emergency Identification Plate which carries your full name, address and Social Security Number. A perfect identification record for you.

**SEND MONEY WITH YOUR ORDER AND SAVE 39c PARCEL POST and C.O.D. FEE!**

**ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART, Dept. 3000-C**
**500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago 10, Ill.**

If you want a LODGE, ARMY, or NAVY INSIGNIA, state name here

☐ I enclose $1.98, plus new 20% Federal Tax (total $2.37). Please send me prepaid a Smart Leather Billfold with my name and favorite Emblem engraved in 23k Gold. You are also to include the Emergency Identification Plate carrying my Full Name, Address, Social Security No

**MY FULL NAME** _____ (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

**ADDRESS** _____

**CITY** _____ **STATE** _____

☐ Check here if you want us to ship the above C.O.D. for only $1.98 plus 20% Tax, postage and C.O.D. charges.

● **Social Security Number** . . . . . .

**ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART**
**500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago 10, Ill.**

## *Rush Your Order!* OUR SUPPLY OF LEATHER BILLFOLDS IS LIMITED!

# "Don't jump at conclusions!" says HI to HATT

# KESSLER'S BLENDED WHISKEY

KESSLER'S PRIVATE BLEND. 55% Grain Neutral Spirits. 85 Proof. Julius Kessler Distilling Co., Incorporated, Lawrenceburg, Ind.